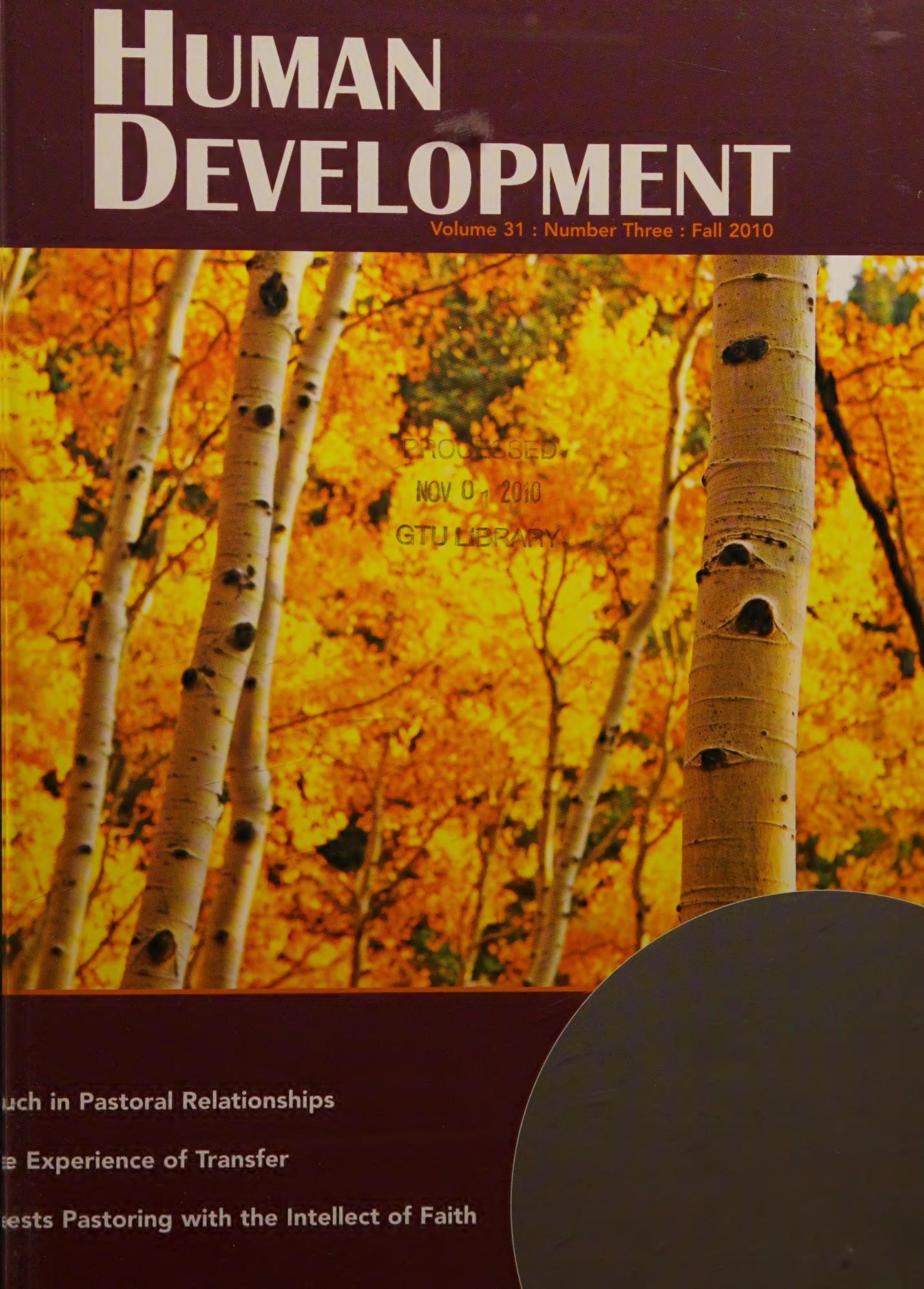


# HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Volume 31 : Number Three : Fall 2010



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# HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

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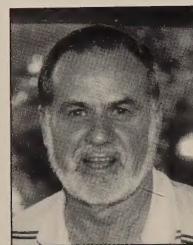
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The quarterly magazine HUMAN DEVELOPMENT (ISSN 0197-3096) is published by Regis University. Subscription rate: United States and Canada, \$49.00; all other countries, \$53.00. Online subscription: \$24.00 for one year. Single copies: United States and Canada, \$10.00 plus shipping; all other countries, \$10.00 plus shipping. Non-profit postage rate paid in Denver, Colorado. Postmaster: Send address changes to HUMAN DEVELOPMENT, P.O. Box 3000, Dept. HD, Denville, NJ 07834. Copyright 2010 by HUMAN DEVELOPMENT. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

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# Editor's Page

## The Quality of Our Pastoral Conversations

My friend John loved dahlias. He grew hundreds of them every year. In the fall he would carefully dig up the bulbs and store them in a cool dry place over the winter. In the spring, he would give some to friends to plant in their own gardens, challenging them to a competition for the biggest and most beautiful flowers.

John died in April. I know he was hoping for another season of planting, cultivating, and sharing flowers and bulbs. But after a ten-year battle with leukemia, pursuing every possible treatment, his body gave out. At his wake, there in a basket, were his dahlia bulbs, one last gift to his friends and family to remember him.

The three that I took home with me never grew. Maybe they didn't like the plane ride. Or more likely, I did not plant them correctly. Living at a distance, I never enjoyed the benefit of John's personal instruction on dahlia planting. I'm sure it would have made all the difference. When I spoke to his wife recently, she promised to send me more this fall so I could try again next year.

Although I'd love to see those beautiful bold flowers in my garden to remind me of John, I will remember him nevertheless. I will remember him for his joy in living, his seemingly endless capacity to care for each person as if they were the only one in need of his attention, and his unbounded faith in what love can accomplish. Among the many things that John left with me is his deep conviction that our actions have eternal implications.

He did not mean that God was keeping track of our good and bad deeds like an accountant recording credits and debits. No! (John would have used a more colorful word.) Rather, he would have said—in the spirit of the great Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner—that in everything we do there is the potential to become immersed in the eternal presence of God. Life is always permeated by grace and we are always impelled toward the divine.

The anonymous poem printed in the handout for his funeral Mass included these stanzas:

You can love me most by letting  
Hands touch hands, and  
Souls touch souls.

You can love me most by  
Sharing your joys and occasions and  
Multiplying your duties.

You can love me most by  
Letting me live in your eyes  
And not in your mind.

Perhaps I remembered all this because I was working in my garden yesterday and missed again the dahlias that didn't grow. Or perhaps it was because I found again the leaflet with the poem amidst the clutter of papers on my desk, reminding me of all my obligations and responsibilities.

Eternal implications. As I reviewed these articles for this issue of **HUMAN DEVELOPMENT** I found many instances of the eternal implications of the everyday actions that are a part of our various vocations, regardless of our particular callings, our ages or cultural backgrounds. Brendan Geary and Elaine Baine are discussing eternal implications in their article "Touch in Pastoral Relationships" when they write:

Christian faith is one in which the embodied, physical, tactile reality of our being is an essential part of our spirituality, our faith and our lives.... The Christian faith has often been suspicious of touch and there is a long history of fear of the flesh and anything relating to pleasure or skin-to-skin contact. Ministry happens in the real space of human contact; emotional, physical, sexual, spiritual, intellectual and social.

Ben Harrison, in his article, "Perseverance—Just for Today," reflects on the eternal implications of his daily decision to live out his commitment as a Missionary of Charity:

I want to give God all that I am, all that I have, all that I love, all that I do and all that I will become—and I want to do that absolutely, totally, today, forever, in time and beyond time.

What we do in time has meaning beyond time. We affect people in ways that we do not know. Each touch, each yes to another's need, each flower—planted, enjoyed, given—has eternal implications.



*Robert M. Hamma*

Robert M. Hamma

# Touch

## in Pastoral Relationships

Brendan Geary, F.M.S., Ph.D.,  
and Elaine Bain, S.N.D., Ph.D.

*"The Word became flesh and dwelled among us."*

These words from the Prologue to St. John's Gospel remind us that we are embodied beings, and that the Christian faith is one in which the embodied, physical, tactile reality of our being is an essential part of our spirituality, our faith and our lives. The Christian faith has often been suspicious of touch and there is a long history of fear of the flesh and anything relating to pleasure or skin-to-skin contact. Ministry happens in the real space of human contact; emotional, physical, sexual, spiritual, intellectual and social. The purpose of this article is to explore some of the issues related to touch in pastoral relationships, particularly given the prominence given to the subject of child sexual abuse in recent years. The topic of child sexual abuse will be given special consideration.

### TOUCH IN EARLY DEVELOPMENT

Before we discuss the issues related to touch in ministry it is important to take some time to understand the place and importance of touch in human development. One of the most obvious things about newborn babies is the importance to the baby—and to its mother and other caregivers—of touch. Babies are hard wired to want to be touched and human beings—thankfully—appear to be equally hard wired to want to pick up babies, gaze at their faces, rock them, cuddle them and keep them near.

Babies get hungry and thirsty and experience anxiety as a result of internal or external stimuli that disturb them in some way. If these needs are not responded to quickly the baby will experience stress and the body will release cortisol, a hormone released

into the brain to enable the body to break down protein and help to produce the glucose which is necessary to provide energy and increased blood flow. While this is helpful in the short term, it can be damaging if allowed to continue for long periods, and can cause long-term damage or increased levels of anxiety for the baby. In order to reduce the cortisol levels and the baby's experience of distress, parents feed, provide water or milk, stroke, soothe, hold, rock and generally attend to the infant. Babies who do not receive this care can develop higher sensitivity to stress and be flooded with cortisol without the ability to calm themselves. However, babies who experience good touch from their caregivers go on to be comfortable with touch in later life, and develop the ability to regulate their own emotions in times of distress.

#### TOUCH IN CHRISTIAN TRADITION AND PRACTICE

In the gospels Jesus is presented to us as someone who was at home with himself and comfortable with touch. He asked for children to be brought to him to be touched (Mark 10:13), allowed Mary to anoint his feet (John 12:3), touched people to cure them (Matthew 8:15), and accepted a kiss as a sign of greeting (Mark 14:45). In order to demonstrate and model the importance of service to others, he washed and dried the feet of his apostles (John 13:1-20). People struggled to have physical contact with Jesus throughout his ministry.

Touch is also an essential part of many sacramental, liturgical and devotional practices. Baptism involves the anointing of the breast and head of the baby, Eucharist involves consuming the consecrated bread and wine, marriage is consummated through intercourse, ordination requires the laying on of hands as well as anointing with holy oils, and the sacrament of the sick requires anointing with oil. Kissing is one of the most intimate of human

acts, and this is also present in our liturgical and devotional life. Priests kiss the altar at the beginning and end of mass, and kiss the book of the Gospels after proclaiming the Gospel. On Good Friday people traditionally venerate the cross by kissing the exposed wood as part of the service, and members of religious orders often kiss their profession cross before making their final commitment. One of the most popular devotional practices is the recitation of the rosary, which involves fingering the beads rhythmically as people make their way through the various mysteries (see Anne Richards' *Sense making faith: Body, spirit, journey.*)



Touch is also important in a great deal of pastoral practice. One of the most publicly significant changes that was brought in with the renewed liturgy was the introduction of the sign of peace at mass. Priests often meet people at the door of the church as they make their way out, and pastoral ministers often offer people a hug at significant moments such as bereavement, illness, and other times of personal distress. They can also express positive emotion when people have moments of joy or celebration, for example when someone has passed an important examination, celebrates a significant professional achievement, or at weddings and other meaningful events. As can be seen from this brief overview, it is impossible to remove touch from Jesus' ministry or the spiritual and pastoral life of the

church without removing or avoiding significant dimensions of Christian practice.

#### TOUCH IN MINISTRY

In the light of recent abuses and concerns related to the sexual abuse of children, many people in ministry have become afraid to touch children in any circumstances. There have also been misunderstandings regarding appropriate touch in some pastoral situations. Priests and others who work in pastoral ministry have the joy and satisfaction of working with many healthy people. We also, however, encounter other people at times of distress or deep hurt, or who have not had healthy experiences in their childhood. As mentioned earlier, the capacity to regulate emotional states, manage stress and handle complex emotional situations while under stress, is a direct result of the healthy touch that a baby experiences in the early months and years of its life. It is no exaggeration to say that the quality of touch experienced by a baby is an indicator and predictor of relational well being in adulthood. Therefore, people who are products of unhealthy touch, who have been victims of sexual abuse, or who have been physically neglected, are often at risk of further suffering in their adult lives.

Ministry allows ministers to have access to intimate and vulnerable parts of people's lives. Our positions and roles, with the tradition that lies behind us, create a context where trust is often assumed. For the most part, of course, those who enter ministry have been found capable of holding that trust and acting accordingly. We know, however, that this sadly is not always the case, and even good ministers can make poor or careless decisions that can have a negative impact on people.

Before proceeding, it is perhaps worthwhile to pause to reflect on the variety of ways that we can experience touch. The following useful list, which reflects a continuum of touch

experiences, was compiled by Hunter and Stuve (1998) and is quoted by Karen Litchfield (2006, pp. 104 - 105):

- Accidental: brushing up against someone
- Task-oriented: helping someone out of a chair
- Attention: "its your turn"—sign of peace
- Celebratory: friendly, helpful, nurturing, caring
- Emotional/expressive: gratitude, reinforce a point, offer support, convey disapproval
- Aggressive: impulsive, disregards boundaries and may cause harm
- Sensual: soothing caress or tender embrace (without sexual stimulation) within an intimate relationship or between close friends.
- Sexual: communicates overt or implied sexual interest or attention.

This list also reveals the complexity of touch. We know from studies in communication that there can be a gap between the intention of the person who sends a message and the interpretation of the person who receives it. It is quite possible that an experience of accidental contact could be interpreted in a sexual way by another person, or that a hug that intended to express compassion could be experienced as intrusive and unwelcome. Litchfield writes that there is no room in ministry for forms of touch that are intrusive, aggressive or sexual, and that an apology should be offered if touch happens accidentally. Touch should be handled with great sensitivity in all situations.

Moving on from labelling types of touch, Richard Gula divides touch into three categories that people can experience in ministry. These categories will be illustrated with examples that people have shared with us:

- Good touch. This is the kind of touch that is affirming, welcome and healing. A volunteer who spent time with American relatives of victims of the Lockerbie bomb over Christmas and New Year of 1988—1989 tells the following story.

*I was a member of a retreat house community that was asked by the local bishop to offer ourselves to help in any way possible. When we arrived at the high school which was used as the centre of operations, we were directed to the art room, which had been turned into a lounge for the American relatives who flew over to Lockerbie after the tragedy occurred. I spent some hours of each day talking to the relatives, listening to their experiences and sharing their shock, grief and sadness. On one occasion after Christmas, there was only a handful of people remaining in the lounge. I had gotten to know some of them well, and on one occasion, rather than engage in conversation, I gently began to massage the shoulders of a woman in her mid-thirties. I felt a bit afraid in case this would be experienced as unwelcome, but the woman sat back and relaxed, let out a huge sigh of relief and said, "Thank you! This is just what I needed." In retrospect I probably should have asked her permission, but I appear to have made the right judgment. After that I offered shoulder massage to a number of the people present, most of whom were grateful for the touch and the comfort.*

- Confusing touch. This is the kind of touch which creates uncertainty or confusion, or which carries an ambiguous message, or is interpreted that way by the recipient. The following story was told by the secretary of a busy parish.

*On one occasion a new priest came to the parish who was very friendly and engaging. He was very warm, quickly got to know people and had a reputation as a good listener. At the same time he liked to give people hugs and was "touchy feely" with*

**Touch should be handled with great sensitivity in all situations.**

people who visited the presbytery. Over time he would give me a hug in the morning and in the evening before I left. I wasn't too comfortable with this but didn't know how to ask him to stop without initiating a potentially difficult conversation. I think that what upset me was the feeling of affection and playful comments he would often make, like, "Mhm, your husband is a lucky man," or "You're good at this" (as he gave me an extra squeeze). "I should get you to give me hugging lessons." I felt trapped, but on the surface he was just being friendly and playful.

• Bad touch. This is touch that is felt as manipulative, frightening, coercive or exploitative in some way. The following example is taken from a volunteer who worked in a parish:

A volunteer member of a parish recalled how the associate pastor started giving her a kiss on the lips when she was leaving the office. Initially she thought nothing of it. The associate pastor became a close friend of the family and everyone loved him. The associate pastor then started taking more liberties with the volunteer, touching inappropriately and initiating intimate conversations. The volunteer felt unable to

decline the kisses and hugs, or refuse to participate in the increasingly revealing conversations. She felt trapped between the family who "adored" this man and her own increasing discomfort in his presence. When the volunteer was hospitalized, and in a very vulnerable state, the associate pastor would visit often, and started massaging her shoulders, speaking comforting words. The inappropriate touch triggered emotional, psychological and physical stress in the volunteer (who was the less powerful and dependent person), which led to counseling and difficulties in her marriage relationship. Ultimately she had to explain this to her husband and the family moved to worship elsewhere.

When we consider situations like this it is hard not to ask whose needs were being met. How can we begin to decide whether or not a specific instance of touch is appropriate or acceptable? Allan Schnarr provided a very helpful short article on the topic of touch in a previous issue of **HUMAN DEVELOPMENT** ("Safe touch in ministry," Volume 22). He provides guidelines in the form of a series of questions. This article could be very helpful for people in ministry or for

those who are involved in training in this area. Unquestionably, touch can be positive. We have only to think of the effect of the photograph of Princess Diana holding the hands of a person who had AIDS, to understand the power of touch to communicate acceptance and love, to bring healing and to overcome barriers of hostility and hurt. Touch can bring "untouchables," such as lepers or people with AIDS, back into the community. Hospital chaplains will know the importance of touch at times of bereavement or distress.

At the same time, it can be fraught with dangers and ambiguities. Those who write on this topic have noted that touch is usually initiated by the most powerful person in a relationship. The person with most power—usually a man—has the freedom to initiate touch, but the receiver does not have the same power to refuse, as they have more to lose. The receiver may be in some kind of dependent relationship with the other person, such as a client for counseling, a directee in spiritual direction, member of a church group or congregation, or child in a school or parish group. Issues of power are never far away when dealing with touch. In pastoral ministry or



counseling the person providing service is often idealized and placed in a position of authority, therefore, there is a need to reflect seriously on the appropriateness of touch, for the responsibility lies with the minister or therapist.

Another issue is that of culture. In some cultures people embrace or kiss as normal ways of greeting. In parts of Africa, for example, it is normal for men who are friends to hold hands while they talk, but not for men and women to hold hands. Until recently it was unacceptable for children to be beaten in schools in the United Kingdom. As well as culture, individuals have their own preferences, so for example, where the sign of peace may be welcomed by many people, it could be unpleasant for others. The suspension of the sign of peace in British churches in the autumn of 2009 as a result of the swine flu scare was a source of relief to a significant number of people who either didn't like the sign of peace or who objected on liturgical grounds. Groups and communities can also have cultures that become problematic. One person shared the following experience:

*When I joined the community, hugging each other at the sign of peace was already the accepted practice. However, it was evident that some members of the community were not comfortable with this, and there was also conflict between certain members. If someone had stopped hugging it would have been very noticeable, and may have caused embarrassment or discomfort. It would also have made the conflicts in the community more open. It was easier just to go along with the group norm, even though, at times, it felt false.*

## EARNING FROM COUNSELING

There are books on pastoral theology and ethics which offer guidance and advice in the area of touch,

but, to our knowledge, there is no research on different practices and outcomes. If we turn to the world of counseling however, which has some areas of overlap with ministry, we may be able to benefit from the small amount of research that is available in that discipline (see *Touch in psychotherapy: Theory, research and practice*).

Writers in this area note that Freud used touch at the beginning of his therapeutic work and then changed his mind. Freud felt that touch was gratifying the needs of the patient in a way that was unhelpful. It also interfered with transference, which he was coming to see as being central to the psychoanalytic process. Freud also feared that touch could lead to the arousal of sexual feelings on the part of the patient or the analyst.

Touch can promote healing, help to build trust, and, in particular, help clients to overcome shame, mistrust and feelings of alienation from themselves and others. As we know from pastoral ministry, it can also bring comfort and support in ways that are more powerful than words or attentive presence. There needs to be a clear distinction with regard to the type of touch that is used in the therapeutic setting. Therapists who are in favor of using touch in therapy might consider holding a client's hand, touching a finger, touching their shoulders or perhaps giving them a hug. There is also a difference between client-initiated touch and therapist-initiated touch. The research suggests that therapists tend to model what they themselves experienced: those who were touched by their own therapists are more likely to use touch themselves, and those who were not touched are more likely to avoid touch or to believe it is not therapeutic.

Those who are not in favor of making use of any touch in therapy argue that touch is never clean,

as it always carries the possibility of ambiguity. Touch can promote dependency, when clients come to expect or look forward to being soothed or cared for in this way. Some therapists believe that rescuing clients from their own pain or distress in this way is anti-therapeutic.

Research on counseling clients suggests that some clients benefit from touch and value it, and others are not comfortable with it. It has been suggested that clients who experienced abuse either reported the most benefit or most distress at being touched by their therapists. For some the power differential makes it impossible to respond freely to experiences of touch. Clients who felt they had a choice in this area felt better about it. It has also been shown that clients who are in emotional distress are more likely to misinterpret touch. Touch was experienced positively when it was respectful of the client, was done for their benefit, clearly promoted therapeutic outcomes and could be talked about in the therapy.

As the research suggests, people in pastoral ministry in particular have to be aware of their own history and experiences. If they were victims of abuse and feel attracted to touching others, they need to reflect carefully on their motives. If natural human touch is incorporated into ministry in a way that empowers people and is respectful of them, giving them a choice and opening up the opportunity to talk about it, then it may be beneficial. However, where touch is seen as a necessary therapeutic intervention, the psychotherapist or pastoral minister would be advised to refer to a massage therapist with a speciality in providing therapeutic touch for abuse victims. We need also to be aware that people who are mentally ill or in emotional distress may be prone to misinterpret touch. This knowledge may be helpful for those who are

*While people,  
including ministers,  
have a right  
to their own  
boundaries, in  
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the feelings and  
sensitivities of  
others have to be  
taken into account.*

involved in spiritual direction, or who do pastoral counseling or offer other forms of personal support.

#### TOUCH IN UNEXPECTED SITUATIONS

Richard Gula offers three simple and straightforward guidelines for touch in pastoral ministry which are easy to keep in mind:

1. Always seek permission before touching.
2. Always respect the other person's right to refuse.
3. The perspective of the less powerful person must have priority.

This kind of advice is useful, particularly where the minister is in control of the situation, and can exercise choice calmly and in an intentional, informed way. However, what about situations which are ambiguous, or fluid, where the minister is suddenly confronted with a situation which he or she has not created, but which requires an instant response? Consider the following scenarios, which have been experienced by people in ministry:

- A newly ordained associate pastor was assisting in First Communion in his parish. At the end of mass each of the children came up to the pastor and they hugged each other. The newly ordained associate pastor was uncomfortable with this but went ahead as he felt it would be awkward and embarrassing if he kept the children at a distance after the pastor had initiated hugs for everyone.

- A seminarian was assisting a parish as part of a summer placement and offered to help with the choir as he was a skilled musician. He noticed that the women all kissed the pastor on

the lips. He decided to shake hands with the women as he felt that kissing—especially on the lips—would be inappropriate, particularly as he had never met any of the women before.

- A sister was assigned to work in a parish and attended the Christmas Social. At the end of the evening people were approaching to say goodbye and some gave her a kiss. She noticed a man who often wanted to spend time with her hovering around at the front door. She sensed he was hoping to give her a hug. In the circumstances she felt she could not keep him at a distance without it appearing as some kind of rejection. She found an opportunity to meet with him the next day to explain that she did not want him to hug or kiss her as she was not comfortable with this level of intimacy with him.

These situations all involved boundaries. While people, including ministers, have a right to their own boundaries, in pastoral situations, the feelings and sensitivities of others have to be taken into account. In the first scenario, the young priest was safe in the knowledge that everything was public and transparent. When on his own, he could decide his own policy. In the second situation the seminarian judged that it would be unreasonable to expect him to go along with the practice of the pastor, as there is a societal norm that does not expect strangers to kiss each other—especially on the lips—which is seen as a sign of intimacy in our culture. In the third scenario the sister avoided embarrassment, but found a way to have a conversation with the man that clarified the nature of

their relationship. The important point to bear in mind is that whatever happens is transparent and avoids ambiguity as much as possible. Opportunities can be found at a later date to discuss what happened and to clarify the boundaries. This kind of conversation might not be easy, and this is where it can be important to take time to do courses in communication skills, assertiveness and boundaries.

#### VICTIMS OF ABUSE

Victims of abuse are particularly vulnerable when it comes to the experience of touch. Research in this area, however, suggests that victims of abuse are those most likely to benefit from touch, and also those most likely to find it unwelcome or damaging, especially if the experience of being touched recalls in some way the feelings of being a victim in the past (Imes). Pastoral workers need to be vigilant in this area. We should not assume that a person who has been abused would welcome the comfort, feeling of support and potential healing involved in touch. Nor, on the other hand, should we assume that this would always be unwelcome or be experienced negatively. Again, the important point to bear in mind is that of consent; before reaching out—ask.

#### SPECIAL CASE: CHILDREN

The issue of touch is particularly important in any ministry that involves children. The recent publicity given to the sexual abuse of children has led to heightened sensitivity regarding this issue, and also to an undermining of confidence on the part of many priests and pastoral workers in their work with children and adolescents. Many priests, teachers and youth workers look back with relief and amazement at the ease



with which it was possible to organize summer camps, weekend retreats, and other social events in the years before the most recent scandals. Unfortunately, we have moved from a situation where there were insufficient safeguards, to a situation where strict avoidance of touch has the potential to harm our ministry, and could confuse children. For example, if a child falls, cuts an arm or leg or is in need of first aid, avoiding touch altogether is only going to make a minor situation into an incident. What is needed is a clear policy which means that no adult is left alone to help the child.

Charlie Taylor, a head teacher in a school for troubled children in London, helped to devise a physical touch policy in his school where the children were trained to ask for hugs and staff learned how to rub the children's backs in order to help them to contain their anxiety rather than express it inappropriately. He says that the children tensed up at first, but over time came to enjoy giving and receiving massage and back rubs to each other. Teachers need protection from bogus allegations, and a policy gives them guidance on when and how to touch appropriately. Perhaps we can learn from the mistakes and abuse of the past, and find a place where children can be touched in a way that is appropriate and responsive to their needs, rather than let (understandable) fear dictate our policies.

## CONCLUSION

In this article we have explored the issue of touch in pastoral relationships. As we explained earlier, the current heightened awareness of issues concerning the sexual abuse of children, and exploitation of vulnerable or dependent adults, has led to a situation where many people in ministry are afraid to touch at all in case their actions are misunderstood or lead to

accusations of inappropriate behavior. Touch was part of Jesus' ministry and is part of the sacramental, liturgical and devotional life of many churches. Healthy touch is vital for early child development, as babies experience the world, and learn how to soothe and regulate their emotions through the experience of regular and healthy touch. Lack of appropriate touch, or the experience of abuse, requires considerable reparative work by counselors and physicians, with the ongoing support of family members and others. Pastoral workers can learn from mental health professionals regarding the benefits and disadvantages of touch. Advice is also available from writers who have reflected on this topic. Pastoral workers need to be aware of issues related to power, age and gender, and be sure that any person who is touched is able to decline the offer, and to talk about an experience of touch, even if it is accidental. In this way people are respected and ambiguity is avoided as far as possible. Finally we agree with a number of authors who are concerned about the fear of touching children that has taken hold of our churches and society. We want to help to prevent situations where children may be vulnerable to abuse or teachers to false accusation, and are supportive of contexts where touch is possible, with agreed and transparent policies, particularly for children who are in need of the comfort and containment that touch can afford.

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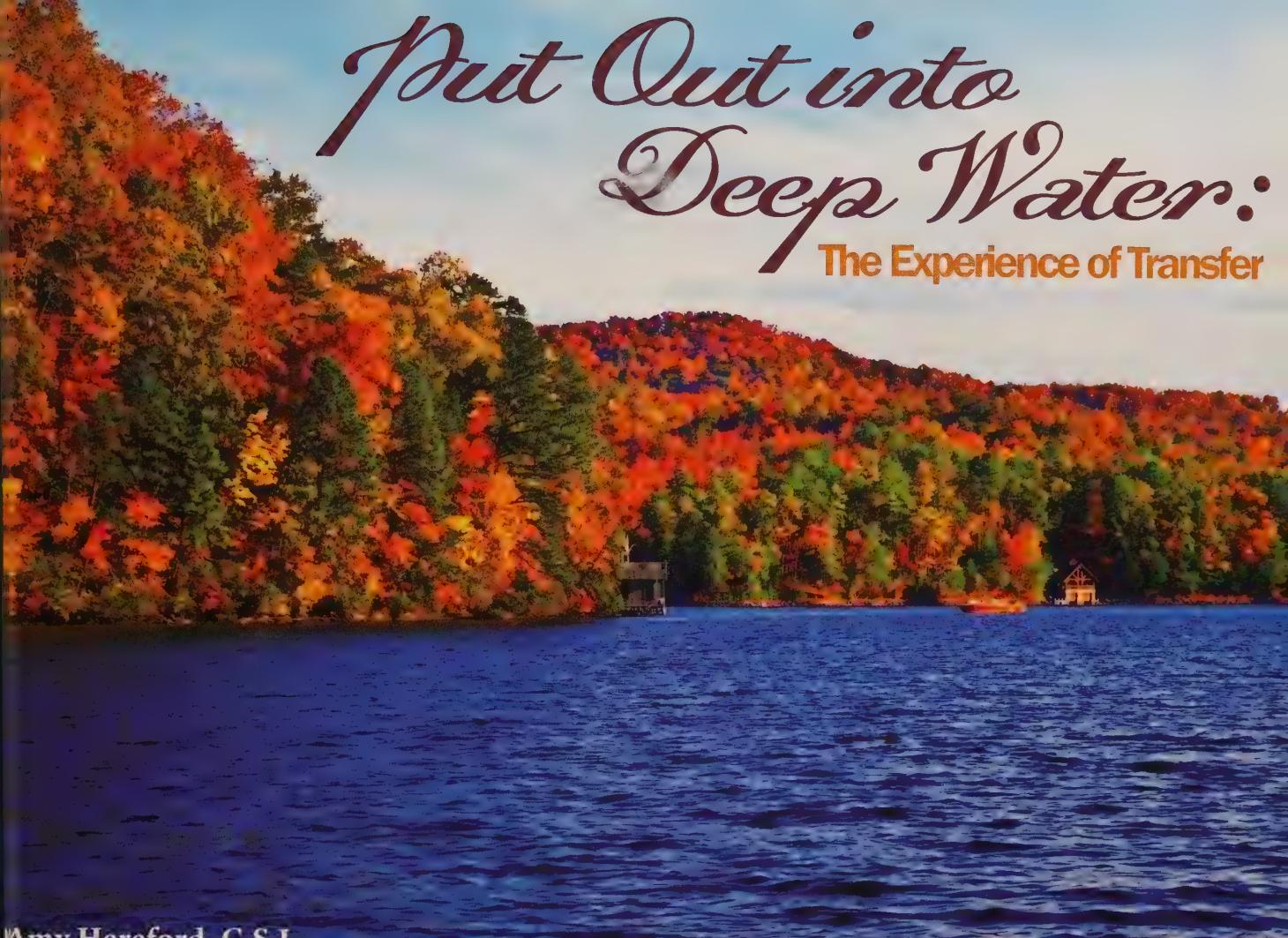
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# *Put Out into Deep Water:*

## The Experience of Transfer

Amy Hereford, C.S.J.

This article discusses research into the experience of members who have transferred from one religious institute to another, particularly over the last 25 years. The largest study of its kind, with responses from 90 members who have transferred and 38 institutes whose members have transferred in or out, it provides a unique window into the phenomenon of transfer, as well as an interesting perspective into personal spiritual growth, discernment and navigating change, which are relevant to integral human development.

In the survey, respondents describe the very different experiences of the member who transfers, and of each of the two institutes. This difference can give rise to divergent expectations as institutes seek to

provide pastoral care for members who are considering transfer and can lead to misunderstanding by leaders and members. Understanding these differences and communicating about them can help to avoid these problems.

### BACKGROUND

The phenomenon of transfer is nearly as old as religious life, which itself dates back to the earliest Christian centuries. Eastern Christianity traces the origins of monastic life right back to apostolic times, speaking of an apostolic succession in religious life, a living connection with Christ and the apostles. In the earliest centuries, Christian ascetics in the East were of three types: hermits, pilgrims and monastics. In the West, religious life

arose somewhat later, primarily in the monastic form. As religious communities stabilized, wandering monastics sought hospitality in one monastery after another, and gained a reputation for being disruptive. This practice was sharply condemned by St. Benedict. Nevertheless, on occasion there was a need to move to another monastery for the good of the member or for the benefit of the monasteries or society. The Council of Chalcedon (451) regulated the transfer of monks, particularly addressing the foundation of new monasteries. Later councils issued further regulations, recognizing that the practice is sometimes laudable, but it is also subject to abuse. Various conditions were placed on transfer, for example, requiring permission of the abbot, the community and/or the

bishop. Later, collections of laws introduced the notion that transfers could only be to stricter institutes, however strictness was left undefined. Thomas Aquinas addresses the issue of transfer in the *Summa*, and the Council of Trent spoke to the issue. The current *Code of Canon Law* requires the permission of the leadership of both institutes and a three year period of probation for members to transfer to another institute (see Canons 684-685). The existence of legislation dating back to the earliest councils, and continuing through the history of the church, demonstrates that through the history of religious life, there have been a small minority of members who, after some years in one religious institute, sought to transfer to another.

Transfer to another institute often occurs when there is a significant socio-logical or theological shift that gives rise to diverse lifestyles; the second half of the twentieth century saw such a shift, both sociologically and theologically, and has seen an increase in those transferring to another institute. A small but steady number of religious continue to seek to transfer. This article discusses the experience of transfer based on an online survey of members carried out in 2009 (Hereford, 2010). It sought to explore four primary aspects of transfer:

first, the profile of the transferring member, second, the reasons for transfer, third, the process of transfer and finally the experience of transfer.

## TRANSFERRING MEMBERS

It is estimated that members who have transferred represent 1.5 percent of women religious in the US; the phenomenon is less common among men. In responding to the survey, transferring members reported entering in their late teens or early twenties; the average age at entrance into novitiate was 21.6 years. The average length of time in the first institute was 22.6 years, slightly longer in more recent decades. There were just a few who entered in their 30s or 40s and transferred after 9-12 years in the first institute, shortly after final vows. The length of time in the transfer process for all respondents was 3.3 years, and this is remaining steady. However, younger transfers, and those who had spent fewer years in their first institute tended to have a slightly longer transfer process.

The respondents did not report the names of the institutes *from* which they transferred, but two thirds reported the institutes *to* which they transferred. Among the women, three religious families received 87 percent of the

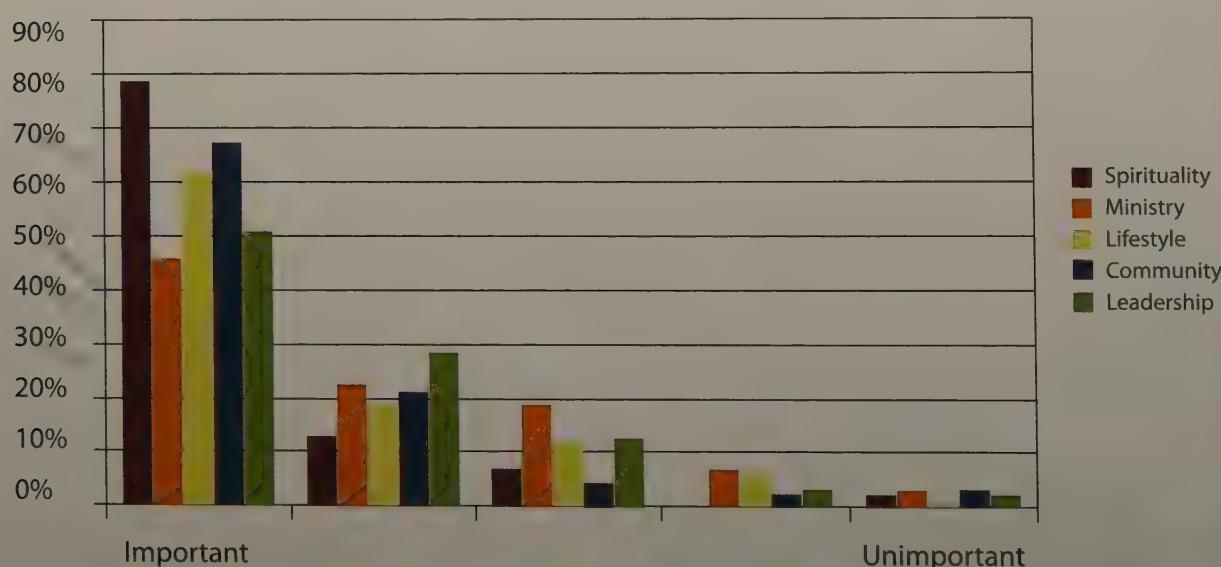
respondents, namely Franciscans, Sisters of St. Joseph and Sisters of Mercy. Larger institutes were generally more successful in retaining members who transferred to them.

The second area of inquiry was the reasons for transfer. Much of the literature identifies the desire to change spirituality or ministry as the primary reason for transfer. This notion was not supported by the survey. Respondents were given five reasons for transfer: Spirituality, Ministry, Lifestyle, Community and Leadership, and asked to rank each from one to five, indicating its importance in their decision to transfer. Most respondents rated all five reasons as important or very important, though Ministry and Leadership were somewhat less important (Table 1).

While spirituality is usually listed as very important, the narratives which will be discussed later often state that the respondent found that the spirituality of the receiving institute, though different, was in continuity with the spirituality of the original institute. While spirituality was seen as very important in the decision to transfer, it was not so much a change in spirituality as it was the opportunity to continue to grow in one's own spirituality which the new institute afforded.

**Table 1:** This table shows how respondents ranked five reasons for transferring.

Most respondents marked all five reasons in the top level or second level of importance.



It is interesting that respondents indicated that all five reasons were very important, showing that the decision to transfer is not based on a dissonance in only one area or the other, e.g. spirituality or ministry. Instead, respondents found a broad-based dissonance with life in the original institute. Many indicated in the narrative that they had been very active and engaged members of the original institute, and their personal and spiritual lives had been deeply shaped by their experience there. Nevertheless they began to experience a growing disconnect between their own deepest calling and the life that they were living. In the narratives, the respondents described the time it took them to come to an understanding of their continuing commitment to living religious life, while at the same time experiencing dissonance with their life in the community of origin.

In addition to indicating the importance of listed reasons, when respondents were given the opportunity to indicate additional reasons of their own, 95 percent responded. Some of these responses referred to factors or personal circumstances particular to a certain individual, e.g. a family situation, health, location. However, a majority of the reasons volunteered by respondents fell in one of two categories. Fifty-seven percent of all respondents wrote that they were seeking a community that had adopted a renewed approach to living religious life or living the vows, according to the spirit of the Second Vatican Council. Respondents had various ways of expressing the issues that they found to be particularly important to their decision to transfer; they mentioned interpretation of the vows, theology of religious life, the emphasis on values over external structures, etc.

The second category of reasons for transfer volunteered by respondents was the notion of dying, mentioned by 5 percent of respondents. Some stated

that their original institute was dying, and that if they wanted to continue to live; they felt they must seek to live out their religious life in another institute. Others stated that they felt that they were themselves dying, and the transfer was necessary to allow them to continue to live and grow personally and spiritually.

The third area of inquiry sought to identify the elements involved in the transfer process, and to gather members' comments on the value of various elements of that process. The most commonly reported elements of the transfer process were Application, Interviews, Ritual and a Companion or Director of the Transfer Process. Some mentioned Divergent Paths, a national workshop for members in transfer, with about 20 participants each year.

#### *The Experience of Transfer*

Respondents generally reported a high level of satisfaction with the transfer process as a whole. Most appreciated the opportunity to meet members of the receiving community and have meaningful contact with them, for example, by living in a house of the institute, working in a sponsored ministry, performing some type of service for the institute, visiting local communities or ministries of the institute and participating in community events. This afforded them an important opportunity to hear the stories and absorb the culture of the institute. Most also found it helpful to meet with other religious who were transferring or who had transferred.

A difficulty reported by members who transfer is the lack of a common history, a network of friends and a support system in the new institute. Those who found a way to have regular and ongoing contact with members of the institute found themselves building this common history more readily and naturally than those who lacked this opportunity. This was particularly

**Fifty-seven percent of all respondents wrote that they were seeking a community that had adopted a renewed approach to living religious life or living the vows, according to the spirit of the Second Vatican Council.**

**“Pray, trust and follow your heart.”**

helpful if it was a natural part of their life or ministry, rather than a series of tasks to be performed or meetings to be scheduled in addition to obligations of full-time ministry and life in a local community.

Respondents reported needing more time for prayer and reflection and processing their experiences of leaving one institute and entering into another institute. They also indicated the importance of spiritual direction, counseling and/or close friends to walk with them through the process of integration into the new institute. Asked for the advice they might give to someone considering transfer, one response was typical: “pray, trust and follow your heart.” Many respondents reported seeing the spiritual journey as the most important part of the transfer process.

Nearly all wrote of the difficulty of leaving their original institute. As seen above, the average member entered religious life in their early twenties, at the threshold of adult life, and spent over twenty years in their original institute. Thus they had spent about half their life in the institute, and all of their adult life there; all their ministry, socialization and spiritual formation as an adult had taken place in the original institute. Nearly all respondents reported that leaving the original institute was a source of pain; they had to grieve the loss of their former life, before they had the opportunity to establish themselves in the new institute, and often before they even knew whether they would ever really be accepted or feel a sense of belonging to the new institute.

Nevertheless, they reported their commitment to live religious life, requiring a level of trust in God, and trust in their own ability to seek out and follow God's call in their lives. Leaving their original institute was a transition of seismic proportions, and some decades after their transfer, respondents still used vivid language in describing it, using the terms: “dying,” “divorce,” “divorce and remarriage,” “deep darkness.”

Respondents reported two additional obstacles that sometimes accentuated the pain of grieving and transition. The first obstacle reported by one third of respondents was misunderstanding by their original institute, its members or leaders. Those respondents who reported that their original institute, while saddened at their departure, nevertheless supported them (9 percent), found that this was an important aid to them as they moved through the process and enhanced their freedom in discerning the transfer.

Respondents also reported the difficulty of starting over after many years in religious life. This was sometimes accentuated when the leadership or the membership of the receiving institute treated them “like a novice,” without acknowledging their decades of experience in religious life. This came in the form of basic instructions on the vows, classes with those in initial formation, or the perception that the member was not fully accepted in the local community. Some also reported that years after they had completed the transfer process and made perpetual profession in the new



institute, they were still referred to as "the transfer." Several reported the moment when they finally overcame this obstacle, noting with satisfaction their appointment to a committee or role in the community, or that members had finally come to view them as simply "a member" rather than a "transfer-member." One respondent pointed out that "transfer" is a verb; it is something that one *does*, it is not a noun, and it is not something that one *is* for the rest of one's life.

While some general conclusions may be drawn about what is helpful for most members in transfer, each person lived a very individual process, and it seems clear that the needs of each individual will vary according to the nature of the person and her experience, and the situation of the original and receiving institutes. Because the situation of each member who transfers is different, needs assessment may help in developing a suitable transfer process, taking account of full time ministry during the transfer process and the varying needs and experiences of those who come to the receiving institute. In addition, a leader of one institute suggested engaging the membership of the receiving institute to help them understand the process of transfer and the particular situation of the member in the transfer process.

#### *Seismic Shift*

The final area of inquiry sought to elicit from members and institutes the experience of the respondents on a personal and spiritual level, eliciting memories of the actual transfer, as well as the reflections on that dynamic decades later. Members responded in good numbers, with some depth and clarity, and at some length; the average survey was over 300 words. Some of the respondents who had transferred were counselors, spiritual directors, theologians, psychologists, social workers, formation directors or superiors in their

institute, and they brought their ministerial expertise to their reflections, providing a very rich source of material.

The respondent described the seismic shift involved in leaving the institute where they had lived their entire adult life. Terms used for this included "dying" and "divorce" as described above. However, respondents also noted that if they had stayed, they would have died interiorly, so dissonant had the experience become for them. Many identified the primary journey of transfer to be a spiritual journey; almost every respondent wrote of a profound spiritual deepening as they left behind all they had known in adult life, not knowing if they would be accepted in the receiving institute. Many years later, their descriptions are vivid and passionate as they shared the "deep story" of their journey. The narratives describe the difficulty of coming to a decision to transfer, and the time it took for respondents to understand the distinction between the call to religious life and the call to a particular religious institute.

Two respondents reported having transferred twice, once unsuccessfully, then after a few years in the second institute, they transferred to a third institute. Both describe the experience in the most extreme language: "disorientating," "devastating," "wrenching," "hellish," "spiritual abandonment." However, both describe their experience in the third institute very positively and after many years report that they are active and engaged members of their current institutes and that their experience, though painful, has forever marked their spirituality and identity.

Respondents overwhelmingly report that they are happy with their receiving institute. Many report that the experience has led them to a much deeper spirituality and has led to personal growth that might not have been possible otherwise. The leaders of receiving institutes also report that the members that have come are active and

engaged in the new institute and that they are generally well integrated into the life and mission of the institute. Only two of the ninety respondents currently question the wisdom of their choice to transfer. One transferred many years ago and questions whether return to the original institute might be possible; the other transferred more recently, does not yet feel integrated and wonders whether the transfer was worth it, given all the personal suffering it involved. Other than these two, all responses were positive, even enthusiastic, about their institute and about their decision to transfer.

#### *A New Synthesis*

Most respondents refer to the consonance between their own life and spirituality and that of their receiving institute. They refer to "a good fit," "a good match," "a sense of belonging," and "a sense of being at home" in the receiving institute. Some report that they felt an almost immediate sense of belonging in their new institute, a feeling that surprised them, given the dissonance they had experienced in their former institute. Fewer respondents reported that it took time to develop the sense of belonging in the new institute, but that in time it had become very deep and real. Some reported awkwardness as, on the one hand, they felt themselves to be "veteran religious" and, on the other hand, they did not know the stories, culture and particular terminology of their receiving institute.

Several reported that they found themselves integrating the spiritualities of the original institute and the receiving institute into a personal synthesis. Instead of abandoning one spirituality for another, they reported that many parts of their original spirituality flowed into their new spirituality; the new spirituality was an expression of latent elements of their spiritual past that brought a fresh vitality and a renewed expression to the respondents' prayer



*"Give yourself  
the time you need,  
the journey has its  
own rhythm."*

life. Many respondents expressed gratitude for the rich spiritual tradition that they had lived in their original institute and an overflowing gratitude for the opportunity that transfer gave them to allow that spirituality to blossom into a full vitality that they experienced as more truly their own, a better fit than that of the original institute.

Only a few respondents mentioned their ongoing relationship with the original institute. Some continued to communicate with members of the original institute and found this to be a great support; for others, contacts were only limited and strained; respondents expressed regret that they were unable to maintain meaningful contacts.

Respondents were asked for their reflections after decades of life in the receiving institute, and particularly what they might say to another person who might be considering transfer. These reflections covered much of what has already been said: it is painful, but it is worth it if it is right for the person; one must be willing to forfeit all that is familiar and comfortable and move out into the unknown and the insecure; seek wise counsel and spiritual direction; "give yourself the time you need, the journey has its own rhythm;" though one is afraid to go, one cannot stay. God calls one to a deep trust, in the darkness and pain of the journey, amid misunderstanding, even one's own, but God opens up entire new vistas and dimensions for those who abandon everything to follow the Divine call.

Those who responded to the survey were currently settled, or are settling into their receiving institute. Not present in the survey are those who may have attempted to transfer but then either returned to their original institute or left religious life. But of those who responded, in good numbers, the experience was profoundly significant and overwhelmingly positive.

#### INSTITUTES WITH TRANSFERRING MEMBERS

The questionnaire directed to religious institutes received a total of 38 responses from women's institutes representing just over 10 percent of the women religious in the United States. Institutes that received members were much more likely to respond to the survey. Some institutes reported members transferring in and members transferring out, however, most of those reporting had more transferring in, with only a few transferring out, or more transferring out, with only a few transferring in. The narrative responses of the institutes that had received more members in transfer were more positive about the experience and more extensive in their responses than those that have more members transfer out than transfer in.

Several institutes reported that as high as 30 percent of their final professions since 1983 were members who had transferred in. The 23 responding institutes combined reported 125 transfers out of 506 final professions, or 25 percent.



The communities' experiences of the members who had transferred were positive; the transferring members were a gift to the receiving institute and played significant roles in the community. They wrote of the need to develop a process that honored the member's experience in religious life, and the need to provide opportunities for gaining an experiential knowledge of the charism, life and mission of the receiving institute. They generally identified "integration," "belonging," "fit" or "becoming a part" of the receiving institute as the measure of success of the process.

Those institutes that had more members who had transferred responded only briefly, restricting their comments to the process of obtaining permission for transfer.

## DISCUSSION

From the above information, it is clear that although there is a marked variety in the experience of transfer, there is also a convergence. Members who discern a call to transfer are a small minority (1.5 percent) of women religious. They come from various institutes and discern a call to another religious institute. Despite the variety, it is possible to formulate a "profile" of member who transfers, from which there is nevertheless a degree of variation. The member likely entered religious life in her early twenties and spent nearly twenty-five years in her original institute. It is likely she has been

an active and engaged member of her original institute, but that she has come to experience increasing dissonance with the institute which makes her perceive ongoing life in that institute to be difficult, or even impossible. She generally takes time in discerning the call, and partially because of her high level of engagement in the original institute and its ministry, finds departure to be deeply painful; at the same time she experiences a sense of call or invitation to new, deeper, fuller life in another religious institute.

Hill (1985) noted that the call to the renewal of religious life issued by the Second Vatican Council caused institutes and their members to undertake the significant task of updating their lifestyles. As institutes and their members moved through this process, there were often differences of opinion on how it should unfold. This divergence gave rise to the dissonance that was the impetus for some members to seek to transfer to another religious institute. At the time Hill stated that he did not believe that members transferred in greater numbers either way—from traditional to renewed institutes or from renewed institutes to traditional institutes. The survey data examined here seems to indicate that there is in fact a differential. It is more likely that members transfer from traditional institutes to renewed institutes. This trend does not seem to have changed over the period of years examined. The same finding was reported in a survey of members

transferring in the 1970s (Sabino, 1978).

The experience of respondents who transfer usually begins with a broad dissonance within their institute, although a few report that they first sensed the call to a new institute. Respondents are often active in their original institute and experience a great sense of loss in leaving that institute as they leave a community with whom they have spent their entire adult life, leaving all that is familiar and secure, and leaving behind much of their personal support system. While this process is painful, it nevertheless involves a great spiritual deepening as the member moves into the unknown, and then eventually becomes integrated into the new institute. Although there is much to learn about the new institute, its life and mission, integration into a new institute happens primarily on an experiential level as members come to know the life and mission in its lived reality. Respondents reported that the experience, though painful, was positive, and they reported a high level of satisfaction with their new institute. Asked to share advice with others who may be considering transfer, respondents made three recommendations: spend time in prayer and discernment, taking advantage of wise counsel and spiritual direction; trust in God, through the chaos as life in the original institute disintegrates and life in the receiving institute begins to take root; and in this posture of prayer and trust, follow your heart, where God's invitation is most deeply perceived.

Institutes that received members were generally positive in their assessment of the transfer phenomenon, noting their concern to assist the member in her ongoing discernment, as well as the members' deepening integration in the life and ministry of the institute. Through the process of transfer, they received members who had lived religious life for many years, and had gone through a process of vocational discernment as adults and recommitted themselves to living religious life, albeit in a new context. These members often proved to be as active and engaged in their new institutes as they had been in their original institutes.

Institutes whose members sought to transfer to another institute suffered loss of the member and found it difficult to understand. This was sometimes perceived as a betrayal or an implicit negative judgment on the original institute, and some questioned the integrity or vocational commitment of the transferring members. However, if the original institutes were able to support the member in the process of transfer, those members generally appreciated that support, and would be more positively disposed to returning to that institute, in the event that they did not complete the transfer process. Hill (1985) notes that the permission of the original institute to allow a member to transfer automatically includes the unconditional permission to return to the original institute. Another canonist states that it sometimes happens that the original institute refuses to receive the member back, a fact which is indicative of the negative attitudes which may surround a member who chooses to begin a transfer, even if that member should return to the original institute (Hite, 1985, p. 229-230).

## CONCLUSION

The experience of transfer is different for each of those involved in

the transfer experience: the original institute, the member who transfers and the receiving institute. Understanding this diversity is helpful in providing pastoral care for the member who is transferring as well as to other members of the two institutes. The regulation of the transfer process has sometimes reflected an understanding of its spiritual richness, at other times it has reflected suspicion of those who seek to transfer and restriction of the practice. At best, legislation should embody the values of the society it seeks to regulate. The movement of the spirit that is evident in these transfers should be supported and encouraged, even as caution is advised to ensure careful discernment of this movement, and ample protection of the rights of the member and of the two institutes as the process unfolds.

The experience of transfer can be seen in the context of the Gospel narrative of Luke 5:

Sitting in a boat, Jesus taught the crowds on the shores of the Lake of Gennesaret. After he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, "Put out into deep water and lower your nets for a catch." Simon said in reply, "Master, we have worked hard all night and have caught nothing, but at your command I will lower the nets." When they had done this, they caught a great number of fish and their nets were tearing.... Amazement at the catch of fish they had made seized them (Luke 5:1-11).

The member who has transferred has generally been in religious life for a good length of time, has been "hard at it all night." Yet they experience the call of God to "put out into deep water," to move out of their comfort zone, to set out without knowing where this new call will lead them. On following this call, they unexpectedly find that great catch of fish, and experience the amazement at

how their vocational journey unfolds in new and unexpected ways.

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Puis J. Cameli

# WISE MEN

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TESTS PASTORING WITH THE INTELLECT OF FAITH



This article was presented by the author at the National Federation of Priests' Councils meeting in May, 2010.

Before I begin, I want to offer one qualification. In these reflections, I have in mind mainly diocesan priests or priests who are involved in parochial ministry. With some adjustments, I think what I have to say can also apply to religious who serve in other contexts.

I have been asked to speak about intellectual formation, one of the four pillars or dimensions of formation identified in *Pastores dabo vobis*, along with human,

spiritual, and pastoral formation. The kind of intellectual formation that I have in mind is certainly not limited to a traditional academic framework of classroom learning, nor is it limited to formal programs of continuing education. The heart of intellectual formation, in my estimation, is a thoughtful reflection on our experience in mission and ministry, a reflection that is challenged and expanded by the resources of our faith tradition. Intellectual formation for priests and their growth in it correlates with a development of thinking that is in service to the Gospel.

It seems, at first, that the ongoing intellectual formation of priests is not such a pressing issue. There are so many other things and so many other constituencies that clamor for attention—and do so legitimately. We are reeling from the international scope of the abuse crisis. We struggle with diminished numbers of priests. We are trying to integrate international clergy who now make up about 20 percent of the active clergy in the United States. In the media and in our local situations, we, along with our people, frequently hear the call to deal with the hot-button issues of women in the church, contraception, and gay rights. We are clearly aware of issues and challenges that deeply touch our culture and our church, such as racism, economic justice, peace-making, and a plethora of complicated life issues. So, in the midst of all this, it does not seem that the ongoing intellectual formation of priests is *that* important. But it is. It is decisively important.

I will suggest two reasons that underscore the importance and urgency of intellectual formation: (1) priests need to reclaim their responsibility to be teachers and, therefore, they need intellectual formation; (2) priests need to think out a series of issues and challenges that press in on the church and the world and, therefore, they need intellectual formation.

#### PRIESTS AS TEACHERS

When priests serve as teachers, they do so in a number of different ways. Teaching can, of course, take place in a classroom setting. Sometimes, this is the case for priests, especially those who have a parish school. Sometimes, it is a matter of an adult faith formation session or giving a talk. Sometimes, it is teaching embedded in a homily or a bulletin article. There is, however, another range for exercising our teaching, and it follows the pattern of Jesus in the gospels. In brief encounters, in the moment, in a simple story or illustration, Jesus teaches. His teaching—and this is especially notable in Mark's gospel, the gospel of discipleship or learning—always *brings people along*. He accompanies them, stays with them, even and especially when they seem to miss the point, as his closest disciples often do. His teaching seizes opportunities, perseveres patiently, and will not rest until people are brought into the light of truth. This teaching in the way and pattern of Jesus is at the heart of what we are to do as priest-teachers.

Over forty years ago, Raymond Brown in his book *Priest and Bishop: Biblical Reflections* identified the diminished sense of priests as teachers. He spoke of an encounter with a Jewish rabbi and friend. Brown described to the rabbi the reluctance of priests at that time (1970) to be engaged in teaching. Brown then describes his friend's reaction:

The rabbi literally became white and exclaimed, "Have you Christians lost to such an extent your roots in Judaism? Have you forgotten that the man who teaches is performing one of the most sacred of all functions, one that brings him close to God Himself?" I could not but hear in his words a distant echo of that unknown prophet whose book is the last in the collection of prophets and who castigated priests because they had lost the vision of their vocation: "Teaching is to be sought from the mouth of the priest, for he is the messenger of the Lord of Hosts; but you have turned away from that course" (Malachi 2:7-8).

#### Reluctant Teachers

Why do we not see ourselves as teachers? Why does this mission and ministry not factor so prominently in our identity, the sense of ourselves as priests? I think that there are a number of reasons and explanations. Consider the following.

We do not think of ourselves as teachers, and probably many of our people do not think of us as teachers. Cardinal Francis George, my archbishop, once remarked that today (unlike years past) most people do not turn to priests for wisdom about life, society, the culture, or the basic directions we are taking individually or collectively in the world. I would add that many of our own people may not be inclined to approach a priest for an explanation or defense of church teaching. "Well, I just disagree with what the church teaches" trumps everything else. This statement of subjective assessment (informed or not informed) closes the issue. Your opinion, my opinion, the church's opinion—it is all on a level field. If the priest does not consider himself a teacher and if the popular assumption that truth is whatever is *truth for me* goes unchallenged, then there should be scant surprise that people do not turn to priests for teaching or wisdom.

Let us consider for a moment how the teaching ministry of priests came to be diminished *within priests themselves*. We can begin with the understanding of Jesus Christ as priest, prophet, and king. From that flow the three *munera* or tasks or responsibilities or offices that are entrusted to priests who serve and act in the name and person of Jesus Christ, head and shepherd of the church. These are the classic *munus docendi* or teaching, the *munus sanctificandi* or sanctifying, and the *munus regendi* or governing.

It is one thing to have these three *munera* set out before us. It is another to experience them in life. Consistently in various soundings of priests, they identify the most satisfying and even, at times, exhilarating moments of their priesthood with the celebration of the Eucharist with their people, especially at decisive moments. The task of sanctifying, especially in a

sacramental context, is central in the identity and mission of priests in their lived experience. Also consistent in priests' reporting are their complaints about the burdens of administration. They do it, and it occupies their time and, sometimes, preoccupies their psyches. The task of governance includes administration but is not limited by it. There is a way, however, that the *munus* of governance, at least under the rubric of administration, clearly has a central spot in the ministry and life of priests. Finally, a third area, more general in its scope, occupies priests. That is what I would term "pastoral responsiveness." Priests are very good at responding to troubled people who have experienced loss or sickness or addiction or failed relationships. They expend quite a bit of emotional capital in trying to help people in trouble.

What should be obvious in this description of the lived experience of the ministry of priests is the eclipse of the *munus docendi*, the task and the responsibility of teaching. It can easily be "crowded out."

#### A Generational Analysis

Finally, there is a generational analysis of priests that can help us to understand their reluctance to take up and live out the teaching ministry in the model and pattern of Jesus who brought people along" to a knowledge of truth.

Consider those ordained between 1965 and 1985. A good starting point is sociologist Sheryl Kleinman's 1984 book *Equals before God: Seminarians as Humanistic Professionals*. Kleinman captures a kind of prevalent ethos at the time among Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish clergy. There was a democratizing movement that reshaped the minister-congregant relationship. Whoever ministered

was not to impose a truth on anyone, but rather was to elicit and affirm their experiences. The key was responsiveness to others in a community of equals and a willingness to "share the journey." Not every Catholic priest in this cohort matched this description, but the description does reflect the religious *Zeitgeist*. The description may also identify some of the roots of reluctance to assume the formal role of teacher among those ordained between 1965 and 1985.

Consider those ordained between 1985 and the present. They may enjoy greater clarity about priestly identity, in good measure developed by Pope John Paul II in his important apostolic exhortation *Pastores dabo vobis*. However, this cohort also labors with limitations concerning the teaching ministry. If they are young, they come from a post-modern scene of drift and relativism, and they thirst for precision and clarity. They may not know, however, that teaching is more than citing the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and the *Code of Canon Law*. It is a matter of "bringing people along" in the manner and pattern of Jesus and so forming disciples. If they come from an international background, they may have a different sense of authority. In some of their contexts, teaching means communicating the truth and then moving on. Teaching in a United States context generally requires some interaction, involvement, and participation, so that truth can be appropriated and "owned." An authoritative word is insufficient to teach well. If priests come from a previous career, such as accounting, engineering, law, or business, they may be inclined to see teaching as a technical application. Again, "to bring people along" as disciples means that teaching must be more an art than an application.



## *Reclaiming This Ministry*

These comments about those ordained in the last forty-five years are very synthetic. They deserve much more development and nuance. I offer them, however, just as an indication that there are formidable challenges to reclaim our ministry of teaching as Jesus taught and as he made disciples. And as formidable as they are, they are not insurmountable, especially if we understand the urgency of reclaiming this dimension of our priestly mission and ministry.

Some of the urgency stems from the very real need that our people have for good teaching and a convincing proclamation of the truth of the Gospel. If we do not embrace the task, others will fill the void, and they will not do it well. In our own family of faith, fringe elements whether of the left or the right can claim the truth and offer clarity but at a terrible cost of accuracy or a false accommodation to the current cultural climate. Either way the full truth of the Gospel is not served.

Pope Paul VI used a wonderful phrase to describe the church community in the world. He said that the church was an “expert in humanity.” Priests share in that title because of their pastoral experience and because of their training. They are experts in humanity, even if they are not always explicitly conscious of this identity. As experts in humanity, priests have an opportunity to offer a saving truth that transcends the flood of bits and pieces of information in today’s world. Through their teaching, priests have the possibility of offering wisdom, direction, and hope to a world in desperate need of these gifts.

My conclusion to this point: priests need to reclaim their task and responsibility for teaching as Jesus taught. It will not be easy to do so, but it is a fundamental and urgent

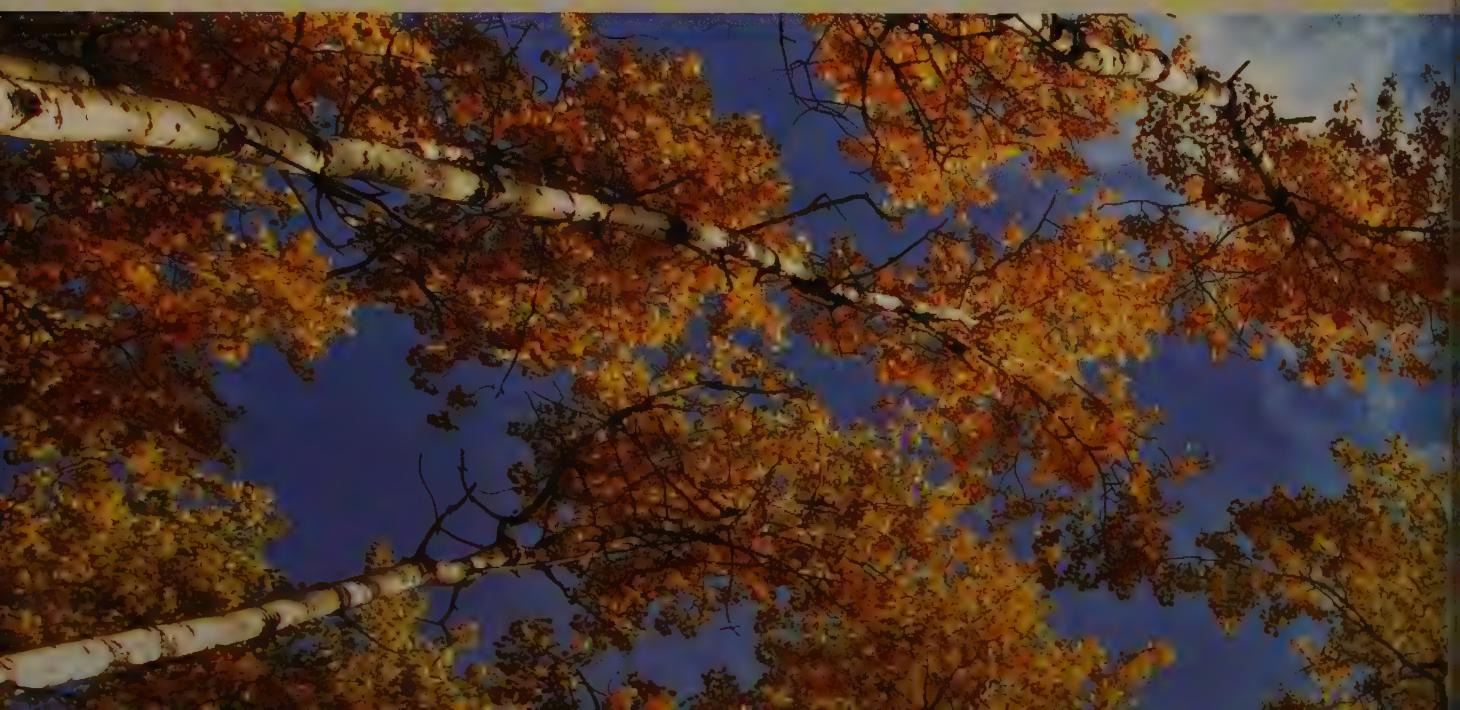
task. If they are to be true teachers, they need ongoing intellectual formation.

## ADDRESSING SOME OF THE MORE URGENT QUESTIONS OF OUR TIME

Priests also need a vibrant and developing intellectual life, because they need to address some of the more urgent questions of our time that press in both on the church and the world. Priests are uniquely positioned to respond to these questions. These pressing issues and questions will be worked out in the course of our mission and ministry, if they are worked out at all. Neither the academic theology of the university nor the church’s magisterium meets these issues on the frontline. Priestly ministry does. The resources of academic theologians and the teaching function of the church must obviously be brought to bear on these issues and questions. And further reflection will benefit from theology and the authoritative teaching of the church. A first and most critical step, however, is the engagement of the issues in the context of priestly ministry itself.

What are these issues that will require the thoughtful reflection and response of priests? What are these issues that will summon us to take seriously our own ongoing intellectual formation? I identify four specific issues or questions: (1) Do we continue to move in the direction of what has been called “massive Christianity” or do we focus on a more intentional and deliberate Christian commitment? (2) How will we engage our culture, by accommodation or resistance? (3) How shall we respond to the movement of peoples, ideas, and goods? (4) In what way can we not only offer moral direction but also offer a moral infrastructure for people today?

These are issues and questions in the backyard of nearly every parish in the nation, and perhaps in the front yard as well.



These issues and questions are decisively important for the future of the church and Christian life. Finally, although these questions do not belong exclusively to priests, priests will be a critical force in moving toward adequate responses and resolutions. I will describe each question in greater detail.

## 1. DO WE CONTINUE TO MOVE IN THE DIRECTION OF WHAT HAS BEEN CALLED "MASSIVE CHRISTIANITY" OR DO WE FOCUS ON A MORE INTENTIONAL AND DELIBERATE CHRISTIAN COMMITMENT?

Among others, Albert Mirgeler in his book *Mutations of Western Christianity* identified a fateful pastoral decision that we made about fifteen hundred years ago. Persecutions and the prospect of martyrdom marked the first several centuries of the church's life. There were no accidental Christians in that context. Christian commitment was deliberate and intentional. With the peace of Constantine and the conversion of the barbarians, the church moved in a new direction. From a deliberate and intentional Christianity, we moved toward a "massive Christianity," baptizing large numbers with the hope that catechesis and formation would follow initiation. In cultures suffused with the Christian spirit, this massive approach could work if not always perfectly, at least adequately.

Fifteen hundred years later, we are at a different point. The culture is not supportive; indeed, in many respects it is hostile to faith. As a church we are shifting and calling people to a more intentional and deliberate Christian commitment. This is evident, for example, in the various forms of sacramental preparation that have emerged after the Second Vatican Council, most notably in the RCIA. The pastoral issue is that we are in fact moving in two different directions at the same time. In many ways we are trying to maintain a "massive approach" in the way that we deploy physical resources and

personnel. And, at the same time, we are seeking more deliberate and intentional commitment from those who are part of the church.

Will we be faithful to the great commission to bring the Gospel to the whole world, if we become a smaller but more committed church? Or will we be faithful, if we are like that dragnet of which Jesus speaks, the dragnet that brings in all manner of fish and maybe a few old boots and other odd objects besides and then leaves the sorting to God? These are questions that are latent, not yet fully explored in the New Evangelization. Every day, priests are on the frontline of these complex questions, and they need the *intellectum fidei*, the understanding of faith to analyze properly, synthesize appropriately, and act effectively.

## 2. HOW WILL WE, AS A PEOPLE OF FAITH, ENGAGE OUR CULTURE BY ACCOMMODATION OR BY RESISTANCE?

It has become a catch-phrase and piece of conventional church-circle wisdom to say that the Christian faith is countercultural. Countercultural? Perhaps in some ways but by no means absolutely. Catholicism is religion deeply embedded in faith in the Incarnation, the mystery of the Word made flesh, the Word come among us in time and space and in the particularity of culture. Catholicism is expressed and alive in a sacramental economy which depends on tangible signs and shared symbols and "common webs of meaning," the phrase of Clifford Geertz to describe culture. All this means that faith must be inculcated or find a home in the culture. For us this means United States culture in 2010, because that is all that we have, and it is not entirely bad. At the same time, if you accept Alan Wolff's premise in his book *The Transformation of American Religion: How We Actually Live*



*Our Faith*, religion, all forms of religion in America, have been co-opted by American culture—from the use of religion to sustain personal and individual fulfillment to a comforting domestication of the mystery of God.

For priests and for priestly ministry, there is the double-edged sword of making faith relevant, that is, in tune with the culture, and, at the same time, making it prophetic, that is, honestly and constructively critical of the culture. It takes penetrating intelligence to sort out what this American culture is and what in it is good and what is bad and what is neutral: individual initiative? the individualistic pursuit of personal goals? freedom from external constraint? autonomy and independence from objective values? the priority of convenience in the face of life choices? the decency evident in trying to give everyone a fair break? making what is difficult invisible by putting it out of sight, if it has to do with race, unborn status, disability, foreign birth? It is a complicated dance to make faith come alive in a culture and, at the same time, to critique and purify that culture, to embody faith in culture and to resist the culture prophetically. All this takes wisdom and intelligence. And it is a task that daily confronts a priest who has his eyes open.

### 3. HOW SHALL WE RESPOND TO THE MOVEMENT OF PEOPLES, IDEAS, AND GOODS?

In the United States, Catholicism is growing and becoming more diverse. That growth has its origin in large measure in immigration, the movement of peoples from other parts of the world. The diversity of people has often focused us on concern for multicultural sensitivity. We put a *sarape* on the altar, use some kente cloth, say “The Lord be with you” in Vietnamese or Tagalog. In fact, the deeper issue is immigration—a process and a journey of profound deracination and upheaval followed by an often heartbreakingly process of re-construction and re-configuration in alien territory. All this, as I have personally discovered, has reverberations well into the third generation. Along with the movement of peoples, there is the rapid movement of ideas and information. This has to do with computers and iPods, with the cultural export of America via Hollywood, and the mass media that occupy so much of our life space. There is also the movement of goods—world trade for better or worse, globalization, outsourcing, the realignment of local economies with lost jobs and collapsed pensions. Nearly all this movement of people, ideas, and goods plunges everyone into a death, sometimes with a hope of resurrection but often without such a hope. This movement is like a swirl, and priests living in the world and with their people are in the middle of it all.

It takes a sharp intellect to analyze and understand this movement. It takes a heavenly wisdom to bring the pieces together in faith. It takes prudence to sustain practical hope in the midst of this flux. And priests who are on the frontline of it all must be intelligent, wise and practical to make the difference that only faith can make.

### 4. IN WHAT WAY CAN WE NOT ONLY OFFER MORAL DIRECTION BUT ALSO OFFER A MORAL INFRASTRUCTURE FOR PEOPLE TODAY?

This is a complicated and immensely important question. Generally speaking, the perception of the church from the outside is that of a moralizing institution that is always ready to preach values that are scarcely compatible with contemporary sensibilities, values that are not even lived out in the very church itself. It is a hard sell to promote our teaching about sexuality or justice for that reason.

I am completely convinced of the correctness of our moral teaching. For example, has the disjunction of the unitive and procreative dimensions of human sexuality led to healthier, happier, more fulfilling relationships? In fact, the opposite has happened. Has an economy driven mindlessly by various market forces and detached from human concerns for justice and equity brought us world prosperity and peace? In fact, the opposite has happened.

As correct as our moral teaching is, there is a catch and a major deficiency that priests must deal with daily. And it will be up to them to take steps to remedy this deficiency. It is this. Although our moral principles and directives are clear and correct, we have not been so clear and helpful in providing people with a moral infrastructure for living them out. A moral infrastructure means those resources and supports that enable persons to deal with the challenges of embodying the values of the Gospel, most especially in a non-supportive world.

I think, for example, that the origin of the ferocious hostility of some gay activists directed against the Catholic Church stems from the church’s teaching on homosexual activity. Even more, I believe, that hostility has to do with the failure to provide a moral infrastructure to live out the values that the church proposes to those with same sex attractions. In other words, the church correctly teaches that homosexual acts are disordered, that is, they are incoherent with God’s design for human sexuality, and, therefore, cannot be endorsed. But unless the church through its ministry offers those who struggle with same-sex attractions some means to deal with their conflicts and dilemmas, the church seems to leave struggling people in a lurch—with a clearly defined moral demand but no practical resources for addressing it. That is a surefire formula for intense rage. Similar things could be said about abortion, artificial contraception, divorce and

remarriage, immigration questions, just wages, and so forth. Here is an interesting side note. Pope Paul VI dedicated the third and little read-part of his encyclical *Humanae vitae* to help struggling married couples with resources and encouragement as they would strive to live out the Christian life in their particular circumstance. In other words, he offered them a moral infrastructure.

Priests are on the frontline of dealing with moral values and teachings. At the same time, they are the ones who—with intelligence, prayer, study, and prudent discernment—can begin to address the pressing issue of moral infrastructures, resources for living out the Christian life. Obviously, this requires significant intellectual engagement.

#### A Decisive Role

My conclusion: these four questions represent important and urgent issues which priests face on a daily basis. Priests are uniquely positioned to begin to respond to them and to develop practical solutions. Again, let me repeat that these questions will not be solved by magisterial teaching nor by academic theology. The magisterium does not have a creative and imaginative function. It is meant to keep us faithful and together. And it is my assessment that academic theology, overall, is not connected with the pastoral realities that priests face every day. So, if these questions are to be answered and if these challenges are to receive some practical resolution, priests will play a decisive role. The questions are in the priests' court. If, however, priests are going to take up these questions, they will need a lively intellectual life. They will need ongoing intellectual formation, that is, a way of cultivating intelligent and informed reflection on life in the light of faith.

#### CONCLUSION

At the beginning of these reflections, I indicated that my purpose was to motivate you to consider reclaiming the ongoing intellectual formation of priests as a central task and challenge. I offered two reasons why intellectual formation is so important: (1) it is the foundation upon which the priestly mission and ministry of teaching is based; and (2) it is the necessary basis for responding to some of the more significant and urgent questions of our time, questions for which priests are uniquely positioned to respond and which require clear thinking guided by faith.

What I have not indicated are the practical measures that we can take to develop a high quality of effective ongoing intellectual formation for priests. We priests need to develop those practical steps. *The Basic Plan for the Ongoing Formation of Priests* contains some helpful indications. The National Organization for the Continuing Education of Roman

Catholic Clergy (NOCERCC) can provide very valuable resources and bring the educational experiences of priests across the nation in dialog with each other. If there is a will and if there is motivation, it can be done.

If we can reclaim ongoing intellectual formation and reclaim our task of teaching and begin to address the important questions, a very exciting and promising future lies ahead for us and for the church. We will more truly be servants of the one who came to witness to the truth, the truth that can set all people free.

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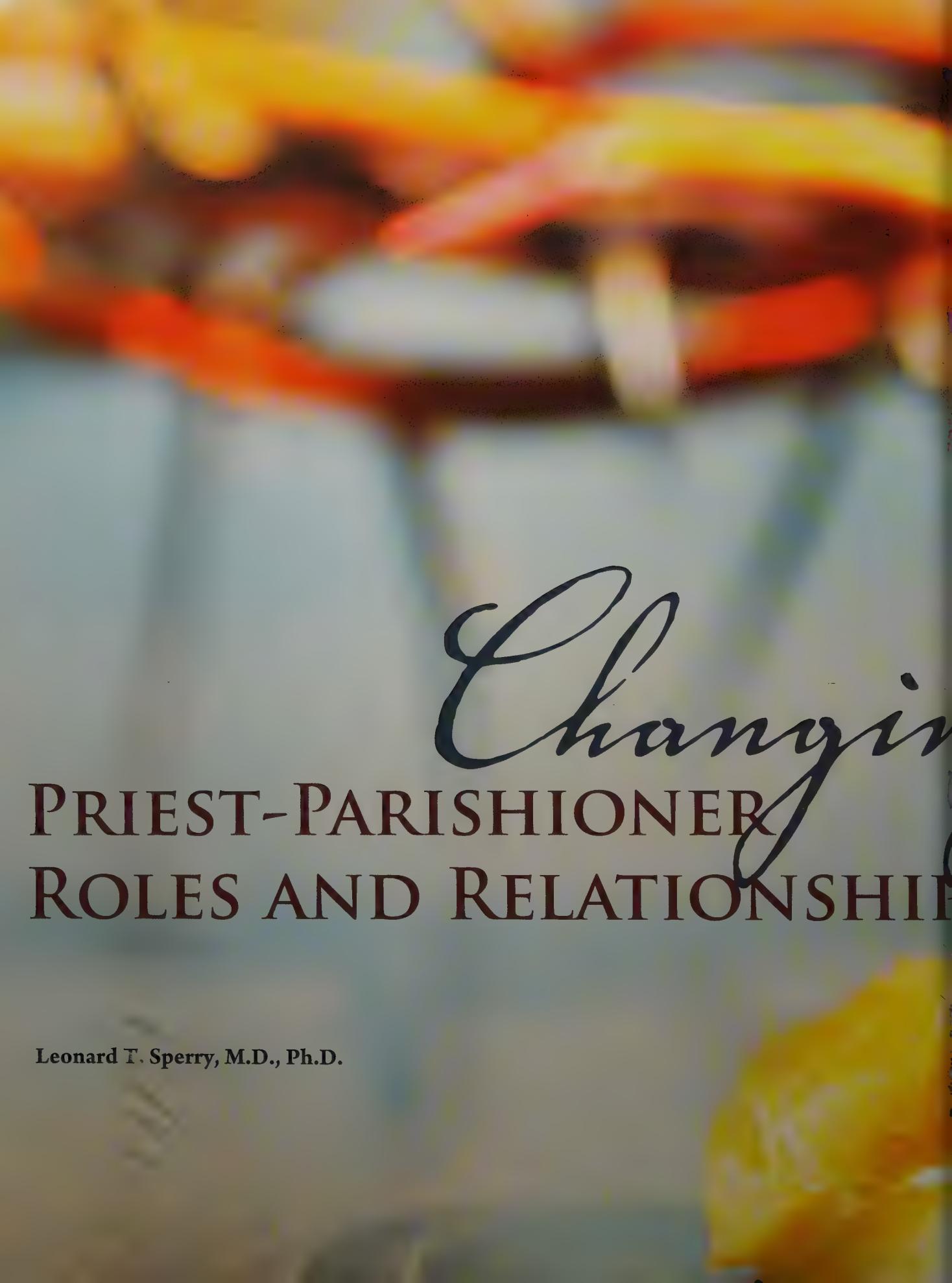
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# *Changing* PRIEST-PARISHIONER ROLES AND RELATIONSHIPS

Leonard T. Sperry, M.D., Ph.D.



The Year for Priests provided Catholic laity an unprecedented opportunity to show their support, appreciation and gratitude to the priests in their lives. It also provided laity the opportunity to reflect on the many changes that have occurred in the past several years. Had the Year taken place before Vatican II, its meaning and its celebration in the U.S. would have been markedly different from today. It would be different because of the radical shift that has occurred in priest-parishioner roles and relationships. While there were major cultural changes occurring in the 1960s besides Vatican II, the implementation of the Council's initiatives dramatically changed and shaped priest-parishioner roles and relationships. Few imagined that this meeting of the world's Catholic bishops over a period of three years (meeting face-to-face for two months per year from 1962 through 1965) would have effected such profound change. The implementation of *Lumen Gentium* was probably the most decisive factor in this relational change. Also known as "Light to the Nations" and the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium* is the first and most important of the 16 documents of the Council.

This article describes the changes in roles and the relationship of priests and parishioners within the context of broader historical changes and with *Lumen Gentium*. It begins with a description of Catholic parish life in the U.S. before and after the Vatican Council and identifies several concurrent factors that fostered a sense of economic and social equality that most Catholics had never before experienced. Then, it highlights the profound influence of *Lumen Gentium* on the roles and responsibilities of both priests and parishioners and how these changes have altered, and continue to alter, the relationship between priests and parishioners.

*The role of the priest is still that of provider of sacramental services, but now includes coordinator of parishioner talents and spiritual gifts.*

## CATHOLIC PARISH LIFE: BEFORE AND AFTER VATICAN II

In the years prior to Vatican II, a “fortress” or “ghetto” mentality characterized life for many American Catholics. Many Catholics were descendants of immigrants, of lower socio-economic status (SES), and faced discrimination, limited opportunities, and other forms of adversity. Catholic parishes provided refuge and support which resulted in a subculture that was tightly knit, predictable, and emotionally secure. Catholics drew meaning and strength from the certainty of their beliefs, customs, rituals, rules, and the leadership and encouragement of their parish priests. Life was filled with statues, medals, holy cards, grace before meals, Friday fish fries, and priests and nuns in religious attire. Mass attendance was high, criticism of the church and its leaders was low, and a sense of “connection” to the sacred was as close as reception of Holy Communion, benediction and personal devotions. Few ever considered “leaving” the church and the promise of heaven seemed assured by remaining in the state of grace. Needless to say, this vibrant subculture promoted a common vision and a sense of unity among parishioners. Priests and religious were held in high esteem, and the expectation of obedience to priests and the church, often blind obedience, was normative.

Growing up in my parish in the years before the Council remains a most pleasant memory for me. The parish staff consisted of Monsignor, the pastor, three curates (we now call them associate pastors), 10 nuns in the school, a parish secretary and a janitor. There was a part-time male coach at the school, but no lay teachers. There were six Masses on Sundays that were always jammed. Most every parish member seemed to be involved in one or more of five parish activities: Holy Name Society for men, Christian Mothers for women (even if unmarried or without children),

Confraternity of Christian Doctrine (CCD) and Catholic Youth Organization (CYO) for children and adolescents, and the St. Vincent de Paul Society for those who wanted to help others. Mass attendance as well as attendance at parish activities was very high. The parish priest’s role was largely that of providing sacramental services while the parishioners’ role was that of receiving those services. Furthermore, the priest-parishioner relationship could be described as dominant–submissive, i.e., parishioners were submissive to parish priests.

In the years following the Council my parish underwent many changes. Within 20 years the pastoral staff was significantly reconfigured to a pastor, an associate pastor, a lay pastoral associate, and 10 full-time lay pastoral staff. Only one nun remained in the school, the principal, and the rest of the staff consisted of lay teachers, an assistant principal, a coach, and a school counselor. The liturgy schedule shifted to a Saturday afternoon mass, with two masses on Sunday. A parish council was formed that advised the pastor or actually made many financial and administrative decisions. Approximately 40 parish ministries evolved, including 12 related to the parish’s Office of Human Concerns, of which the St. Vincent de Paul Society is one. A group of highly committed parishioners became actively involved in all these ministries.

The most obvious differences pre- and post-Vatican II are that the parish has fewer masses, more professional lay personnel involved in the church and school, and the thrust of parish ministries is more outward into the community as contrasted with its inward focus in the past. Less obvious are changes in roles and relationships. The role of the priest is still that of provider of sacramental services, but now includes coordinator of parishioner talents and spiritual gifts. The role of parishioners is still that of recipient

of sacramental services but also includes being more proactive in parish activities. For some parishioners, this proactivity also extends to their jobs and the larger community. The nature of the relationship of priest and parishioners has shifted to that of collaborators.

## CONCURRENT CHANGES

In the U.S. a series social and political changes occurred concurrent with the theological changes of the Council. Unquestionably, the 1960s were a time of rapid and radical change. Besides the Vietnam War and its protest movement, there were a number of social movements that championed the cause of social equality and equity in American culture. These included the women's movement, the civil rights movement, various human rights movements, and the so-called sexual revolution. Some years earlier, government initiatives, such as the G.I. Bill, had the effect of greatly expanding the middle class and fostering economic equality.

Particularly for Catholics, the G.I. Bill made a college education a reality for an entire generation of returning Catholic servicemen. Access to and attainment of a college education, otherwise out of reach for many Catholics, led to managerial and professional jobs. This resulted in a dramatic shift upward in socio-economic status for a large segment of the Catholic community. But with these changes the laity's sense of unity and common vision began to fade as the church became increasingly heterogeneous. This heterogeneity would be reflected in all indicators of religiosity ranging from theological beliefs, level of parish involvement and participation, and views of priests (Rinaman, 2009). It also led to the demise of the "fortress" mentality that had provided a subculture that had supported and assisted generations of Catholic in their parishes.

While some might attribute the loss of this subculture to Vatican II, the Council was more likely a reflection of its demise rather than its cause (see Doyle' book for more details). The impact of Vatican II, particularly *Lumen Gentium*, has been immense and it has been well received. National surveys show that some 80% of Catholic laity voice support of it (Rinaman, 2009).

## PRIEST-PARISHIONER ROLES AND RELATIONSHIPS: THEN AND NOW

Before Vatican II, some 50 or more years ago, the role of the laity was very limited and very well defined. Theologian Thomas O'Meara, O.P., characterized good and loyal Catholic laity as those who would "sit at the sermon, kneel for communion and reach into their pockets for the collection: in short, 'to pray, pay, and obey.'" O'Meara points out that this pray, pay, and obey role for laity was normative behavior throughout Christian history. Not only did theology texts of the time have almost nothing to say about the laity's role but "the code of canon law said they had one right: to receive from the clergy spiritual aid for their salvation; thus they were defined negatively." In short, priests were theologically trained, ordained and expected to function as leaders in active ministries.

As a result, priests had nearly total decisional control of both sacramental and parish life. In contrast, parishioners were not theologically trained (with a few exceptions) nor given leadership positions, but instead were passive recipients of ministry. Consequently, they had little if any decisional control. The relationship between priest and parishioner reflected a superior-inferior dynamic. Parishioners were to be seen and not heard, nor to question or disagree with their priests. The preferred relational interaction was

simply: "Yes, Father." Prior to the Council, Sunday Mass attendance rates were high, probably exceeding 80%. However, after Vatican II, a new model of church emerged and the roles and relationships of priests and laity began to change.

*Lumen Gentium*, the central document of Vatican II, effected a paradigm shift in ecclesiology, i.e., the theology of the church. In this document the church was described as the People of God. "Everything which has been said so far concerning the People of God applies equally to the laity, religious, and clergy" (n 30). Particularly striking in this document is that the People of God are called a "royal priesthood" (1 Peter 2:9) (n 9) with the unique designation and recognition of the "common priesthood of the faithful." A similar designation is the *priesthood of the laity*. "Though they differ essentially and not in degree, the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood are none the less interrelated; each in its own way shares in the one priesthood of Christ" (n 10). What this means is that fundamentally, the members of the church—laity, religious, deacons, priests, bishops—are equal by virtue of baptism. This means that the laity are not second-class Catholics. Instead, clergy, vowed religious and laity are called to collaborate in implementing the mission of the church. All are called to "play" together to bring about the kingdom.

The implications of this recognition are profound and far reaching. Thus, instead of priests shouldering all the responsibility for the church's mission, their role now is to coordinate the gifts, charisms and ministries of parishioners such that "all according to their proper roles may cooperate in this common undertaking with one heart" (n 30). No longer are the laity to participate in the ministry of the hierarchy, instead: "The lay apostolate . . . is a

participation in the saving mission of the church itself. Through their baptism and confirmation, all are commissioned to that apostolate by the Lord himself (n 33). In terms of calling,

The laity, however, are given this social vocation: to make the church present and fruitful in those places and circumstances where it is only through them that it can become the salt of the earth. Thus, all lay people, through their gifts which they have received, are at once the witnesses and the living instruments of the mission of the church itself ‘according to the measure of Christ’s gift’ (*Ephesians 4:7*)” (n 33).

In short, not only is the role of the lay person changed to that of active participant in the mission of the church (in a way different from the role of priests), but the role between priest and lay person is now to be “interrelated.”

Following *Lumen Gentium* increasing numbers of parishioners participated in a wide array of ministries, mostly within their parishes. With the inauguration of parish councils, accountants and others with financial and managerial training shared their expertise with pastors. Others completed ministry degrees and took responsibility for religious education and a host of other parish-based ministries.

#### DIVISION OF LABOR: THE FOUR SPHERES OF LIFE

Essentially, *Lumen Gentium* established a division of labor in the kingdom. Priests were to focus their efforts primarily in the parish and the church, while the laity should focus their efforts primarily in the three areas or spheres of family, work, and society (n 31). That call involves bringing about the kingdom of God in the world; in other words, primarily to “play” or participate

in non-parish spheres, and secondarily to “play” in their parish community. Hopefully, in the context of parish ministries, both priest and parishioner would “play together” in a collaborative fashion. Pope John Paul II was adamant that this division of labor be upheld and insisted that priest and religious should not hold public office since this worldly activity is the sphere of the laity. Accordingly, in 1981, Robert Drinan, S.J., elected to the U.S. Congress four times by a largely Catholic vote in Massachusetts, resigned his office in response to the Pope’s directive.

For many Catholic laity participation in parish ministries is viewed as their primary “calling.” Some lay people are indeed “called in different ways to more immediate cooperation in the apostolate of the hierarchy . . . and may be appointed by the hierarchy to certain ecclesiastical offices which have a spiritual aim” (n 33). But this calling is limited to a very few laity. Interestingly, a key indicator of lay participation in a parish is church attendance. In 1993, some 51% of those identifying themselves as Roman Catholic said they regularly attended Sunday Mass. However, the actual percentage of those attending was a mere 26% (Chaves). Figures from a 2007 national survey find that 39% report Mass attendance, but data on the actual percentage of attendance was not reported (Rinaman).

In his apostolic exhortation, “The Vocation and Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World” (*Christifideles Laici*) Pope John Paul II warns against the “temptation of being so strongly interested in church services and tasks that some (laity) fail to become engaged in their responsibilities in the professional, social, cultural, and political world.” He insists that church—for the laity—should serve as a source of faith and holiness and as a place to be outfitted with the spiritual resources to serve their mission in the world.

#### LAY PERSON AS PRIEST, PROPHET AND KING

*Lumen Gentium* also declares that all the People of God participate in the threefold-ministry of Christ as priest, prophet, and king. Formal initiation into this threefold-ministry occurs in the rite of baptism. During the anointing with chrism, “a sign of the royal priesthood of the baptized,” the presider says: “The God of power and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ has freed you from sin and brought you to new life through water and the Holy Spirit. He now anoints you with the chrism of salvation, so that, united with his people, you may remain forever a member of Christ who is Priest, Prophet, and King.”

*Lumen Gentium* spells out specific ways in which the laity are called to participate and share in Christ’s threefold ministry. They carry out Christ’s priestly function as they live their lives in the world by making God present to others as they strive to live a holy life. To the extent to which they consecrate their daily activities at home and in the workplace they fulfill this priestly function.

For all their works, prayers and apostolic endeavors, their ordinary married and family life, their daily occupations, their physical and mental relaxation, if carried out in the Spirit, and even the hardships of life, if patiently borne—all these become “spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” Together with the offering of the Lord’s Body, they are most fittingly offered in the celebration of the Eucharist. Thus, as those everywhere who adore in holy activity, the laity consecrate the world itself to God (n 34).

They carry out Christ’s prophetic function as they give witness (verbally or in silent witness) to their faith by the

way they live in the world. Being a truth teller and seeking justice while refraining from criticism and judgment of others also reflect this function. In short, "it is the duty of all lay people to cooperate in spreading and building up the kingdom of Christ" (n 35).

They carry out Christ's *kingly* function by working to bring the world in the direction of truth, life, holiness, grace, justice, peace and love. "Therefore by their competence in secular disciplines and by their activity which grace elevates from within, let them do all in their power to ensure that through human labor, technical skill and civil culture the goods of creation may be developed for the benefit of everyone without exception...." (n 36). In short, it is the very way in which parishioners live in the world that the threefold mission of Christ is enacted.

#### CELEBRATING THE YEAR OF THE PRIEST: THEN AND NOW

A celebration of the Year for Priests prior to Vatican II might have included a novena, a potluck dinner in honor of the pastor and other priests and would have been attended by most if not all parishioners. Inevitably, there would also have been a heartfelt gift presented to the beloved pastor. Today, a celebration would more likely involve a much smaller number of "core" parishioners, i.e., those who are highly participative in parish ministries and supportive of the parish's priests. It might include ongoing personal and communal prayer along with formal reflections on the emerging roles and relationship of priests and parishioners. This is exactly the way in which my own very active parish celebrated the Year.

How this momentous year was memorialized and celebrated may reveal differences, differences that reflect the extent to which these role and relationship changes have been internalized by both priests and parishioners in a given parish or diocese.

This is to be expected as it typically takes a minimum of 50 years for a major cultural and institutional initiative to be reasonably accepted and implemented, and another 50 years for it to be fully assimilated and accommodated in everyday life. Accordingly in the years to come, the laity's role in transforming the world can be expected to increase and the priest's role in empowering laity will also increase. This is likely to result in even greater changes in the priest-parishioner relationship.

#### CONCLUDING NOTE

The roles and relationships of priests and parishioners have dramatically changed because of the profound shift in our basic understanding and view of the Christian life. Largely because of Vatican II, the understanding of what it means to be a lay Catholic is radically different than before the Council. While this understanding has yet to be fully internalized in all persons in U.S. parishes, the role of the parishioner has expanded from passive recipient of parish services to proactive missionary to both the parish and the world. As such it has shifted from "pray, pay, and obey" to "play, pray, pay, and obey." Actualizing the baptismal charge to share in Christ's threefold mission means that their role has shifted from being largely receptive to more active, while their relationship with their parish priests has become less submissive and more collaborative. The nature of this change has been much more basic than obvious post-conciliar changes such as mass in the vernacular and related liturgical changes. This change in priest-parishioner roles and relationships represents a basic paradigm shift in the theology of the church. It could well be that *Lumen Gentium* and its implementation is one the most important moments in the entire history of Catholicism.

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The true, deep reason for dedicated celibacy is . . . the choice for a closer and more complete relationship with the mystery of Christ and the Church . . . (*Sacerdotalis caelibatus* 54).

Celibacy chosen "for the sake of the kingdom of heaven" is the celibacy proper to the priest. It is falling in love. It is possible only for someone who has integrated it into his spiritual life (*Guide to Formation in Priestly Celibacy* 31).

This article focuses on male chastity for those who have taken or are preparing to undertake a life of stable celibate chastity, a step that typically occurs within the rite of diaconal ordination. It chiefly focuses on the formation in and the sustaining of celibate chastity for men seeking to live or living as secular/diocesan clerics. Much that may be said about "growing in celibate chastity" for diocesan clergy is of course applicable to members of religious or secular institutes, but I do not attempt directly to address them or single men. I also do not engage in the debate about the canonical requirement of celibacy, although it is fair to say that my sympathies generally lie with the case for obligatory celibacy, as I see this as building the sacred minister into a closer and more complete relationship with the mystery of Christ and his church. The lead quote to this article from Pope Paul VI's 1967 encyclical *Sacerdotalis caelibatus* well expresses my position.

#### CELIBATE CHASTITY AS A DYNAMIC STATE

Growth is a condition of life. Even into old age, we still grow; even into a good death, we grow. Celibate chastity is, however, not a death to sexuality. Rather, it is a way of living out human sexuality that is both a gift and an oblation. We can only offer that which we possess, and the "holy exchange of gifts" in a life of celibate chastity necessarily calls for sexual maturity. "Maturity" itself matures, and the oblation, the struggles, and the joys differ with age.

I have chosen mostly to use the first person "I" throughout (rather than "we" or "one"), because I want to write in a way of "sharing my understanding," rather than in an "expert" way. I am still growing in maturity, and my discerning the gift and growing into it has been difficult and uneven. I am keenly aware of the need for priests to be "fathers," for my own father was bedridden when I was four and died when I was eight,



A close-up photograph of autumn leaves on a tree branch. The leaves are a mix of vibrant orange, red, and yellow hues. In the lower-left corner, a portion of a person's face is visible, showing their eye and forehead. The background is blurred, showing more of the tree and other foliage.

# Living Deliberate Chastity

P. A. McGavin



and my entry into manhood was lonely. I am also keenly aware of the need for sound Catholic catechesis. It was not until my adult years that my growth into celibate chastity was supported by the fullness of Catholic faith, with my entry into full communion with the Catholic Church. My Catholic life has had far too much exposure to the prevalent “protocol” responses that govern relations between clergy and laity (e.g., the protocol documents issued under the aegis of the Conference of Catholic Bishops in Australia, “*Integrity in Ministry*,” and “*Towards Healing*”), and far too little exposure to the vitality of the church in magisterial documents and in holy and joyful priestly lives. I seek in this brief article to share something of what I have learned from living and praying, reading, sharing with close friends and through pastoral experience. The documents of the church, in speaking of nurturing the gift of celibate chastity, refer to “natural and supernatural means” (e.g., *Optatam totius* 10, *Presbyterorum ordinis* 16, *Sacerdotalis caelibatus* 74). This brief article takes as given that “a true

spiritual life . . . alone provides a solid foundation for the observance of celibate chastity” (*Sacerdotalis caelibatus* 75). This article has more to say on “natural” issues, as these have generally had inadequate attention, and I follow the maxim, “grace builds upon nature.”

#### DISCERNING THE GIFT

Human sexuality in Catholic understanding is directed to generative and unitive fulfillment in marriage (e.g., *Humane vitae* 11). Stating the purpose of human sexuality this way gives it a genital focus, whereas human sexuality is far more encompassing. From the viewpoint of moral theology and its pastoral application, a genital focus is often necessary in order to describe moral acts and for clarity in what is “ordered” and “disordered” in sexual behavior (e.g., *Familiaris consortio* 32, *Veritatis splendor* 80). It nevertheless remains true that our sexuality is larger than its genital aspect, and our sexuality embraces the whole person.

Our religious nature, our spirituality and prayer life, our mental life, our physical lives, etc., are all

infused with and express our sexuality. Our “at-homeness” with our genital masculinity is much manifest in our at-homeness with our whole selves. Chastity that is fulfilled in celibacy is, indeed, “gift”—that is, it is not forced, but is received. Discerning the gift involves noticing and learning a whole life that has dignity, poise and vigor. Growing into and maturing in celibate chastity brings human fulfillment for those whom God calls and gifts. Prayer is central to this growing and maturing in celibate chastity.

#### PRACTICAL NURTURING OF THE GIFT

I now focus attention on the practical nurturing of the gift and treat practical ways of growing in celibate chastity.

##### *Making the Oblation*

Growth in celibate chastity involves struggle. And continual growth is likewise a struggle. Taking on and persevering in a stable life of

celibate chastity requires motive and renewal of motive. For me, the motive is strongest when it is relational (e.g., *Sacerdotalis caelibatus* 54, 59, 70). For me, celibate chastity is a “holy exchange of gifts” that God asks of me and that he enables. In my life, to be celibate is not to be lonely, but to be intimate with our Lord, and through that intimacy, as a man with a capacity for love, to give myself to the church and the world as a ministerial priest of Christ the High Priest (cf., *Pastores dabo vobis* 12). It is priestly relationship with Christ that picks me up and sees me through struggles and loneliness, that sustains the self-denial and that, even in tribulation, brings fulfillment.

#### Living Penance

We live in a highly sexualized society. Growing-up is difficult in my country, Australia, just as it is throughout the world. Children who have barely entered pubescence may be addressed in sexually provocative ways that display a lack of serenity and innocence, even at tender ages. There are many young people—and not so young people—who need our good example of sexual abstinence. Even more, there are many who need the prayers that should support and flow from our own penitence—we priests need to make hidden offerings that God may use for the welfare of his people in a sex-crazed world. Our lives should be lives of penance.

#### Gaining Possession of the Gift

Each year, across the decades I have served as a tertiary educator, I have found a few of my male students dropping in without an academic agenda, “Just for a chat.” I am now more aware of how important it is for young men just to have contact with, to observe, and to engage socially with older men whom they respect as men. A great deal about holistic male

sexuality is communicated implicitly. I sometimes convey this implicit significance by using, as my parting comment to these young men, “Be good”—a comment that, even in secular environments, is usually received and understood.

I think the first time that I ever publicly spoke of my virginity was in a Catholic graduate theology class led by a married lay lecturer. A fellow student afterwards told me he was “blown out of the water.” This sexually active unmarried student had assumed that entry into celibacy was a choice following sexual experience. Young people today need implicit and explicit assurance that entry into sexual maturity is not predicated upon “experience.” I occasionally say to my penitents, “You don’t need ‘experience’ to grow-up sexually; what you most need is to receive your sexuality as God-given.”

#### Being Down to Earth

In the incarnational world of the church, theological interpretation is not a substitute for “down-to-earth-edness.” Young men are confronted, often with urgency, with the reality of their emerging sexuality. Just as young men may seek an adult male who implicitly helps them to define their masculinity, simply by being a man whom they can observe and emulate, so also this seeking may extend to issues more explicitly sexual (even where, as often is the case, the first approach is by allusion). Young men often need to be reassured that they are okay in their awakening interest in things sexual, in the simple physicality of their sexuality as encountered with surprise (e.g., an erection in such sexually non-stimulating environments as a Latin class, in surprise at the content of dreams involving seminal discharge, etc.). A priest’s theological and spiritual development needs to be integrated with human development so that the matter-of-factness of human sexuality fits with, is supported by and leads

into the astonishing theological interpretation of human sexuality that the church espouses.

#### Healthy Culture of the Body

This involves building a “healthy culture of the body” (Pontifical Council for the Family, *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality* 106). Much in the ascetical tradition of the church does not promote a healthy culture of the body, and in the more recent and contemporary magisterial tradition one finds little or no amplification of understanding of a culture of the body that is implied in such key phrases as “wholesome pursuits” (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Declaration on Certain Problems of Sexual Ethics*, *Persona humana* 12).

Physical endowments vary greatly and often our ideals of health reflect what we don’t have (e.g., bulk for the lean man, leanness for the bulky man). A “good body image” can be code language for narcissism, and a “poor body image” can sometimes just be a lack of interest (like the man who has never cultivated tidiness or the man who has never cultivated musical sensibilities). These diversities recognized, a lifestyle that promotes bodily health and vigor and builds a good body image supports the development of celibate chastity.

This observation is witnessed by noticing that poor physique and poor body image are prevalent among persons with marked sexual disorders. Discipline of, care for, and right enjoyment of the body helps the integration of the person and the positive development of chaste celibacy. Attention to a “healthy culture of the body” not only assists our cultivation of celibate chastity, but also promotes chaste celibacy among young men who may be called to the sacred ministry. Bodily health and manliness will not substitute for spiritual and religious discipline, but in a right incarnational

# *The first safeguard in life and ministry for a priest—as for any Christian—is his intimacy with our Lord and lived fidelity to the teaching of the church.*

theology a healthy culture of the body is generally integral to a wholesome Christian life.

## *Safeguards in Life and Ministry*

The first safeguard in life and ministry for a priest—as for any Christian—is his intimacy with our Lord and lived fidelity to the teaching of the church. A first emphasis on “protocol” behavior may weaken truly Christ-like ministry. The hallmarks of Christ-like ministry are vulnerability and authority that are matched by prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1806 ff.). In dealing with any young man, I endeavor where possible to relate with his family, whose parental dignity as “first teachers” (e.g., *Gravissimum educationis* 6) is not relinquished when a young man reaches 18 or 21 years of age. Sadly, however, gaining a family’s respect and trust have at times been used by priests as a cover for sexual abuse. When a priest enters into a friendship that nurtures young men in celibate chastity or that supports priests in celibate chastity, the surest safeguard is another priest as regular confessor. In country areas, this may be more difficult to implement than in city areas, but encouraging ordinary access to another priest for the sacrament of Penance provides a practical and theological safeguard for relational intimacy involving a priest.

## *Human Maturity and Celibate Chastity*

Preparing for celibate chastity and maintaining chaste celibacy necessarily involves preparing for and sustaining a renunciation of genital sexual fulfillment. Temptations exist to engage in sexual relations as a “compensatory activity” (Congregation for Catholic Education, *Guide to Formation in Priestly Celibacy* 15). Reasons for feeling the need to be “compensated” for living as a celibate priest include:

- deficient personal and sexual identity (assuring oneself of the “okay-ness” of one’s masculinity)
- physical urge (physical discomfort or uninvited arousal)
- anxiety and discouragement (orgasm as a means of release of “uptightness”)
- self-pleasure (disordered desire for sexual pleasure).

Exploring these overlapping dimensions generally assists in application of the “law of gradualness” or step-by-step advance. Such step-by-step advance should not be confused with “gradualness of the law” (cf., *Familiaris consortio* 34, and the 1997 *Vademecum for Confessors*, Pontifical Council for the Laity, par 9, note 43), and should uphold the primacy of the objective moral order and the dignity of human nature as created and re-created by God (cf., *Persona humana* 3, 13).

This step-by-step advance should be supported by the means proposed for living a chaste life (cf., *Persona humana* 12 ff.):

- discipline of the senses and of the mind
- vigilance and prudence in avoiding occasions of sin
- modesty
- moderation in amusements
- wholesome pursuits
- cultivating the virtue of love that is true, magnanimous, unselfish, and respectful of others
- constant prayer
- frequent recourse to the sacraments of Penance and Eucharist
- cultivating the means of mental, affective and moral maturity.

## *Modesty*

There is a subtlety in modesty. Just as in one man, a certain informality seems affected and in another unaffected—so in one man, a manner of dressing seems fitting while in another it

does not. In matters of dress and in matters of mind, the virtue of modesty is shown in what is exposed or examined, and what is covered or averted. Cultivation of the virtue of modesty gives poise of body and mind and gathers these for the practice of celibate chastity that is both external and internal. Modesty is both robust and subtle—and people generally pick up on the difference between a manly prudence in dress and manners and a timorousness that simply covers-up the body or leaves sexuality unexamined. Modesty in everyday dress for the ordained becomes more straightforward where there is observance of the 1985 norm of the Australian Conference of Catholic Bishops—clerics are to dress in such a way that they are identifiable as clerics . . ." (cf., *Codex Iuris Canonici* 284).

#### Dealing with Indecency

St. Paul's counsel, "... indecency of any kind . . . must not be as much as mentioned among you . . ." (*Ephesians* 5:3-8, 4:18ff, cf. *Persona humana* 11) should set the tone of our general conversation. In man-to-man talk about sexual difficulties, "precious" language is rarely helpful. Some prudent use of indecorous language will usually be helpful in cutting through inhibition and getting to "how it actually is." A good test as to whether such language is justly used is whether it becomes less necessary, as difficulties are addressed and progress in holiness is observed.

Priests and young men entering a stable life of celibate chastity need expressly to be prepared to deal with "indecencies" of every kind. The principles of education in human sexuality apply also in dealing with sexual indecency. "Only information proportionate to each phase of individual development should be presented . . ." (*The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality* 124). In one-to-one dealing with sexual indecency, I find it best to use simple and direct language (rather than overly delicate or clinical language). This usually cuts through inhibition and gets to the factuality of the behavior. Stripped of the kind of

glossiness that pornography gives to indecency and the lack of rawness that clinical treatment gives, disordered and abusive sexual behavior becomes more recognized and named in its actuality. The objectivity of disorder and the objectivity of order in human sexuality are thereby more clearly portrayed. Our chaste celibacy (particularly in maturity, but also in the innocence of youth) empowers us to assist those touched by sexual disorder, including sexual disorder of the gravest kind.

Just as some smokers and drug addicts quit "cold turkey," so will some ingrained in sexual indecency quit abruptly. For most, however, the maxim of the "law of gradualness" will apply (*Vademecum* 9). Our celibate chastity is a source of strength to those whom we assist as they progressively gain poise and self-possession. Our own prayers and penances are a great help to those whom we assist, as they draw strength from our own self-denial, and begin to see the splendor of human sexuality that is human fulfillment rather than human gratification.

#### Prayer and Celibacy

Earlier I said that I would say more on natural issues than on supernatural issues. As a result, prayer has been less named and less mentioned than is usually the case. But prayer undergirds and breathes through all the "natural" issues that have been considered. Without prayer, a positive and joyful celibacy would not be possible. My views about prayer and celibacy are only tangentially influenced by what I have read, because my own celibate life across decades has breathed not books but prayer.

#### Joy in Celibacy

The hallmark of an authentic Christian celibate chastity is joyfulness. It was for the joy that was set before him that our Lord endured the cross (Hebrews 12:2), and it is our joy in intimacy with Christ and his people that sustains us in our celibate dedication to the ministry of Christ and his church. This joy is no easy joy. Even after some

decades, I still struggle to live in chaste celibacy. I sustain my struggle, not simply because of some external discipline of church order, but because I believe it is the state of life to which I am called as a ministerial priest of Christ. Celibate chastity is integral to my vocation and life with Christ (cf. *Pastores dabo vobis* 29).

It is my struggle—more than my achievement—that bears fruit in my ministry and in my own life. This is because a priest does not choose celibacy as an end in itself. We choose celibacy because it is integral to our vocational intimacy with Christ and his church. Christ is our life, and life in Christ is a life of joy.

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James Torrens, S.J.

# SURVIVING

**D**uring the winter months in the Central Valley of California, drivers are susceptible at a moment's notice to the valley fog. You can be leaving town in clear sunlight and suddenly ram into the midst of it. You can be driving a few familiar blocks in this condition and wonder where in the world you are. What makes our fog notorious is the occasional news about a big pile-up on Highway 99, impacting dozens of cars. Often enough a much higher fog will camp over the valley as a whole, fifty miles broad, while the Sierra, sparkling clear, looks down upon it. That state of affairs is dreary, but it does not pose a threat like the unpredictable ground fog (called "tule fog" around San Francisco). That condition rivals the Alaskan white-out, where a snowy plain blends with a white cloud cover to erase shadows and landmarks and even the horizon.

This experience of losing guideposts and orientation lends itself to the metaphor for a mental condition, "being in a fog." In this state, perspective, norms, meaning seem whited out. Pastors, crisis counselors, suicide hotlines have much to do with people in this circumstance. They are often caught in a perfect storm of things gone wrong—health, employment, family, reputation. All the parameters, all that they guided themselves by, quite effectively—blank, gone.

The scenarios are many. A lifetime companion has just died, or one's child. One's cherished position has been lost. Addiction has taken over one's life, leaving one desperate to shake loose. A self-protective cover is being stripped; one has been found out in something damaging. Perhaps God seems to be hiding, as happened with Mother Teresa of Calcutta for decades.

Perhaps the world just fails to make sense. This mental condition afflicts much of the developed world today. It goes by the name postmodernism. People lack criteria to judge what is right and worthy of them. "What is truth?" they wonder skeptically, just as Pontius Pilate did. Cardinal Carlo Martini summed up the effect of postmodernism on a religious outlook: "There is no more sin, nor pardon, nor redemption, nor self-denial. Life can no longer be thought of as sacrifice or suffering" (Martini, 2008). A century ago the philosophers Jacques Maritain and his wife Raissa found themselves in just that state and were close to a suicide pact before their awakening, their conversion. Joseph Feeney, S.J., has drawn a profile of the university student in this predicament: "His emotions are exhausted, his expectations minimal, his hopes few. And he protects himself with humor." The style of humor is making fun of everything (Feeney, 1997).

Whatever may be impinging on a person—severe personal stress, the absence of meaning and standards, a combination of both—life needs to go on. One needs to keep steering through calamity. The person conscious of flying blind needs direction forthcoming from elsewhere—a wisdom source, an informed conscience, some global positioning system, a burst of grace. The alternative is death of the self, all at once or by stages. Consider the distress of major indecision. "I can't see my way to abandon that hurtful man." "I can't bring myself to make this big change." Responsible decision still has to be made. Others count on it, and one's own well being hangs in the balance.

The greatest of resources is, of course, God's grace. Saint Paul sketches out its dynamics pithily: "We know that all things work for good for those who are called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28). How hard it is to activate, to



Blew upon that fundamental truth! However lost one may feel,  
These words are the lodestar,

We cannot see or know the divine plan. We are not on the mountain looking down. We are too short-sighted for the long view. So we have to trust ourselves to Providence, God's very gradual way of bringing things out right—better than we can have imagined. The Book of Job, the Book of Esther, the Books of Ruth and Tobias, are all about that divine rescue. As the Negro spiritual puts it, "Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel? Then why not every man?" That song emerged from the desolation of slavery. Scripture may seem very faint sometimes; yet who among us, in the teeth of an ordeal, wants to hear those chiding words of the One who calmed the waters, "O you of little faith"?

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#### THE VALLEY FOG

Ahead the ground-hugger fog  
for mile on mile, never a landmark  
but the center stripe, no exit signed.

The mountains looking on this clog  
behold it lit with the sun's white spark,  
though driver's lost to driver right behind.

We each have destination in this bog  
this batting spun by the prince of the dark,  
who muddles illuminations of the mind.

Be not disheartened by the lowdown smog,  
spirit, if you must embark  
through hazards still to haven ill defined.

James Torrens, S.J.



**Just For Today**

Ben Harrison, M.C.

All of us who are members of a religious order, I suppose, react with surprise and disappointment when a brother or sister who has been close to us decides to leave our institute. It is an even greater shock when this is someone who contributed to our formation, or whom we saw as an example or model of the virtues proper to our charism. It seems so easy for these people to abandon their vows, although probably it is more difficult than it seems. We often are not aware of the long struggle that has led to the point of decision. But it is still troubling that so many good and promising people leave the religious life, even after many years of apparently fulfilling, committed service. Thank God there are occasional jubilee celebrations to remind us that there are some who stay. And then there is the list of deceased members to help us remember that there are also those who have remained true to the end—even if in some cases the end came to meet them early, through accident or illness, and in other cases it was more a matter of inertia than of remaining true.

My favorite story on this theme is from the Desert Fathers. A young brother comes running up to an old monk saying, "Oh, Father, guess what! Brother John has run away and gone back to the world!" The old man calmly responds, "My son, do not be surprised that many go. Rather, marvel that some stay!" Our life isn't easy and all of us have difficult periods. As a wise old brother in my community used to say, "It is already a lot that we are still here!"

I remember when I first came. I didn't know if I could make it one week. As the months passed, I kept being surprised to find myself still around. But I just took it one day at a time and waited to see how long I would last. Finally, after several years of annual renewal of vows, it was time to decide whether I wanted to make perpetual profession.

I thought long and hard about the various options that lay before me.

I had always been afraid of commitment, so the thought of dedicating the rest of my life to God (or anything else, for that matter) seemed impossible. I was like an alcoholic confronted with the thought of never having another drink his whole life long. That idea would be enough to drive him to drink! But AA suggests that the alcoholic not think about the future but simply try not to have that drink "just for today." That, at least, seems possible. So I kept going one day at a time.

On the thirty day retreat some months before final vows, I realized that I had a strong desire to give myself to God in this way of life, to make an absolute gift of myself to the Absolute. But I knew that the great joy I felt at that time would not last forever, and that the day would surely come when I would have doubts and temptations. How could I take the plunge now, make such a huge commitment, knowing that everything would change? Well, there were still months or weeks to go before the actual date, so I just continued to live my vocation one day at a time.

About a month before the big day was having a day of prayer. I found

myself restless and head-achy. When I asked myself if this was a manifestation of my fear of the upcoming commitment, somehow that explanation didn't fit. So, since sometimes the opposite feeling has a similar effect, I asked myself, "What if these feelings are a symptom not of fear but of happiness?" And I realized that I was repressing an almost light-headed joy that I had finally found something, Someone, that I wanted to give my life to without reserve. I continued to count the days, determined to enjoy the whole build-up to the big event, and on the day set for my perpetual profession, I simply asked God, "What do you want me to do today?" In my heart I felt a calm assurance—"Today I want you to give yourself to me totally, forever."

It is a strange thing. Sometimes we think of perpetual profession as a commitment for a period of time, just a longer period than temporary profession. In the vows formula, in my brotherhood, we say that we take our vows "for life." But I have come to understand that the deeper meaning of profession is not to be measured in years, or lifetimes or in any way at all. In this act of faith and love, I am saying that now, in this moment, I want to give God all that I am, all that I have, all that I love, all that I do and all that I will become—and I want to do that absolutely, totally, today, forever, in time and beyond time. That is my desire. "Perpetual" doesn't just mean those ten or twenty or fifty years that remain to me before I die. It means for all time and beyond all time. I desire to be united with my God uninterrupted from this moment unto all eternity.

How can I make such a gift of myself? I don't even possess myself, how can I give myself? I don't possess my days or hours, much less my future. How can I hand them over to anyone? All I know is that I have this desire—this yearning has been placed in my heart in this present moment. And I may lose that desire a minute from now. I cannot rely on myself or anything in me, I cannot trust myself or my word or my solemn promise. I can only trust God and his mercy and his grace. But my desire to belong to him is so great, at this moment, that I am willing to make a fool of myself, to risk failure and disgrace. I am willing to risk daring God to do for me what I know I can never succeed in doing by myself. And so I do it, I make my perpetual profession.

But I find that I still have to live my vocation a day at a time. My novice director told us that Mother Teresa herself used to say, when she was younger, "Don't be surprised, sisters, if one fine day Mother runs away with a man." It was not, I suppose, so much that she was tempted to get married as that she wanted to impress on the sisters, in her humorous way, the fact that they had to depend on their own intimate bond with Jesus and not on her. But even holy people know they can't be sure of themselves. The holier they are, the more firmly they are convinced of it. For me, it is better to recognize all this and to say, "It will be a miracle if I don't run away," than to pretend that I never have a doubt.

In fact, the doubts and difficulties are part of the program. They keep us honest, remind us what we're made of

and how much we need God. They force us to make again and again the decision to follow him, and each time we make it, it grows stronger.

But that isn't the only problem. It is also a fact that we change. I am not the same man I was when I first took vows. Even my body's cells have changed, some of them many times over. God has healed me of many weaknesses, given me a certain amount of wisdom, courage and conviction that I never had before. With these gifts, I could possibly have a very successful life in the world. I could have a much more productive, happy, balanced life now, after all I have been given over these years, than I could have had if I'd never been a brother. So why not take the money and run?

Some would say, "How could you even think such a thing?" Others would say, "You've given your solemn word, you've promised God. How could you go against that?" I would like to think that I am too principled to do such a thing, but I know myself well enough to know that I could justify it to myself one way or another. "I didn't know what I was getting into." "I've changed over the years." "The order has changed." "I was too young." No, shame would not keep me faithful. If I am not here because I love God, why would I stay to defend my honor?

What will work, then, to make me stay faithful? I confess that I don't know if anything will work. I could end up running away tomorrow. But what I believe is this—that I have to trust God and beg God and challenge God to keep giving me the desire to be all his—each day—one day at a time. I have to be willing to be totally insecure, poor in spirit, with-

out confidence in my own will. I have to be willing to trust God to give me whatever I need in order to be faithful, one day at a time. I can beg him not to let me fall away. I can plead with him to keep me so desperately aware of my need of him that I will cling to him as though he were my life-preserver in a storm. I can make my commitment anew, over and over again. As I change and grow, as I find healing and new life, as I experience doubts and questions, I have to give it all, again and again, have to feel again and again my own nothingness and the joy that comes from belonging to him more and more, giving him today what I hadn't even received until yesterday. For, if the fire doesn't burn deeper and deeper into the core of the log, it will go out.

Can we do anything, then, besides pray and hope? "Give us the courage to do the things we can." We can be faithful to prayer, nourish ourselves with spiritual reading. We can receive Communion gratefully and renew ourselves through confession. I find that one of the most important things is having a spiritual director, someone to keep me honest. I know I am capable of fooling myself and justifying my own wishes. I need someone who can help me see my own tricks and those of the enemy. My brothers and the poor also keep calling me back to the right road, if I listen to them, if I am willing to listen to them!

Another of my favorite stories from the Desert Fathers is about a young monk and an old monk:

The young monk comes to the old one and says, "Father, I can't make it. I'm leaving."

The old man says, "Wait till morning, get a good night's sleep and you'll be fit for the journey."

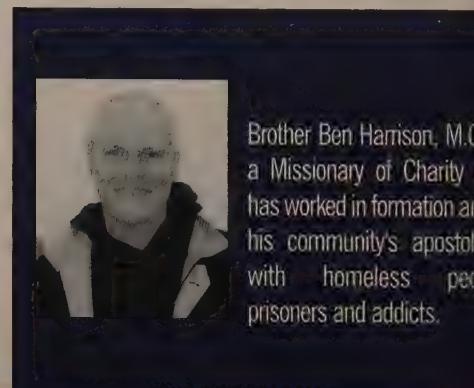
In the morning the young monk comes again. "Right, Father, I'm leaving now."

"No," he says. "Just wait one day, do your work and say your prayers. You can always leave tomorrow."

"Are you trying to trick me? You'll say the same again tomorrow."

"Well," says the old man, "that's how I persevered in my vocation, from one day to the next. So it was for seventeen years, and then I found peace."

For me it has been a lot more than seventeen years now, and I still don't have the peace of total certainty. Who knows how long I'll last? It doesn't really matter—it is God who is the Faithful One. He gives us both "the will and the way" (Philippians 2:13). May he continue to give them, and may we continue to be open to them—just for today.



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Chinyeaka C. Ezeani, M.S.H.R.

# TO WHOM MUCH IS GIVEN:

RESPONDING TO THE VOCATION SURGE IN NIGERIA

The Catholic Church in Africa seems to be one of the fastest growing in the world today. Along with this growth there is an increase in candidates for the priesthood and religious life as well. The number of young women and men seeking admittance into seminaries and religious houses in Nigeria, for instance, has risen considerably in recent years. It is a fact that there is presently a "vocation boom" in the country. This can be seen as a gift. However, challenges and responsibilities accompany every gift. To whom much is given, much is expected.

## SOME OF THE CHALLENGES

A religious woman just assigned to the formation ministry in her congregation once spoke to me with

tears in her eyes. Although she had accepted the appointment and finished her training, she was still battling with fears and apprehensions. Her fears and concerns centered, among other things, on the challenges that young persons embracing religious life and the priesthood faced in modern society. Nigerian society is rapidly changing in every sphere of life. The complexity of these social factors, as well as human nature itself, raise many challenges, especially in the areas of motivation and authentic, lasting commitment.

### *Changes in the Family*

In Nigerian society today, a lot of young people are growing up in families run by career-oriented parents. More often than not, these parents have insufficient quality time with their

children. The reality of economic hardship and instability has forced many parents to focus most of their energy on making ends meet at the expense of a proper upbringing of their children. Because of this, the bulk of the work of religious education is left to the parochial catechists and the schools. The catechists and religious-education teachers try to take up this role, albeit inadequately. Nevertheless, the part parents can play in sound religious and spiritual formation of their children cannot be overemphasized. The parents' contribution is essential for real development of sound ethics as well as handing on and deepening the faith of the young. This lack of religious formation is not only true of the church at large, but also of the candidates for religious life and ordination.



### *Influence of Pentecostalism and Traditional Religions*

Without this formation, young people are easily influenced by religious movements such as Pentecostalism which is thriving and spreading rapidly in Nigeria. Pentecostalism blends easily with certain traditional religious beliefs. As a result, many young people considering a vocation carry with them elements of a spirituality that is, in fact, unchristian. "Soft-cushion" spirituality—Christianity without the cross—in which people are assured that once they believe, it is not "their portion" to undergo any kind of suffering in this world, is becoming very popular. As a result, young people can develop a tendency to seek the easy way out of difficulties and expect instant results and solutions to problems.

### *The Issue of Motivation*

Young people who pursue the priesthood and the religious life do so for various reasons. Some of those reasons can be service and giving, other motives can be quite self-serving. At times, it is not easy to distinguish or identify the motives. The vocation director's role in identifying authentic motives is essential. They can do so much good if they are skilled at helping an applicant get in touch with his or her true motives during their early stages of discernment.

### *Some Other Societal Influences*

It has become the trend in some dioceses and congregations to recruit as many candidates as possible in order to expand and provide a work force for the church. There is nothing wrong with expansion and good works. However, there is need to be careful and vigilant for those in our care. Great suffering has resulted from the admission of unsuitable persons into seminaries and religious orders.

In these present times, there is a wind blowing through society—a wind of religiosity. Sometimes, there is a tendency to show off pious acts as evidence of one's holiness or as assurance of being close to God. It impacts many aspects of life. Today, unlike in the middle part of the last century when vocations to the priesthood and religious vocation were new among the people of Nigeria, the priesthood seems to have become a status symbol. This includes the status among parents of being "close friends of God who have sacrificed their offspring to God." As a result, some parents go to great lengths to put their sons through the seminary to bring honor to the family, even if the young man obviously feels out of place there and is not attracted to celibacy. It is not uncommon to encounter a seminarian or novice who is unwilling to leave the seminary or the convent even though it is clear to him or her that this way of life is not his or her calling. A seminarian in theological studies once confessed

to me that he did not want to become a priest. Yet, he was horrified at the thought of leaving because he was fearful of the negative impact it would have on his father who had been making novenas so that his son would be a priest. These societal realities constitute a great challenge to religious formators in the Nigerian context.

### *Psycho-spiritual Maturity and Development*

Serious psychological problems can impact enormously a person's ability to embrace religious life or the priesthood. Nevertheless, people with such serious problems come forward at times for admission. Serious personality disorders like confused identity, severe self-centredness, addictions of different kinds, problems with authority, difficulties controlling impulses, excessive anxiety, complex and unresolved sexual problems (from sexual orientation to abuse), and deep-seated anger constitute real problems in candidates. Unfortunately, if vocation directors are inattentive or inexperienced, they may be unable to detect some of these serious conditions or at least the potential for them. Admitting such persons can result in troubling difficulties later on in life, with inherent potential for inflicting serious wounds on others—members of community, coworkers, and especially children and vulnerable members of society. Some individuals who should not have been admitted to the seminary

or convent in the first place are eventually ordained or professed. Some of those individuals with serious psychological and emotional difficulties have carried out various kinds of abuses for which the universal Church is paying a very huge price today. Is it not better to learn from the mistakes of the past than repeat the same ones?

#### *Facing the Challenges with Faith and Courage*

There is no need to lose hope in the face of these challenges. The first and most vital step is to accept the challenges with a spirit of gratitude because they are gifts. The next move is to invest in proper discernment of the vocation of candidates who present themselves. One of the ways of doing this is to examine how much the life of a candidate or applicant is marked with a consciousness of God's presence. How often does she or he engage in daily prayer and other concrete spiritual exercises? Are there possibilities that the individual is seeking this way of life with motives like self-fulfilment, or is it sought for a progressive transformation and growth in the love of God? A person's motives need to be addressed to see whether the religious motivation is the vital and principal one guiding the choice. This is crucial because it is really the religious or spiritual element that gives credence to the religious and priestly vocation as a life of self-transcendence.

Consideration should also be given to the general health of the individual. This includes not only the physical, but also his or her mental well-being. In addition to this, a healthy degree of care, thoughtfulness, and sensitivity to others, that is, expressions of a healthy altruism, should be evident. Compassion is usually a healthy sign of the possibility of a meaningful celibate life—the ability to sincerely weep with those who weep and to rejoice with those who rejoice.

Persons capable of using their intelligence in understanding their life experiences and responsibly discerning their life choices can be said to be capable of deciding to embrace a vocation. Those who cannot reason maturely and are therefore blown about by all kinds of different views will have difficulties with the many situations which call for adaptation in religious or priestly life. An adequate level of intellectual ability is of course necessary for grasping and assimilating the vital elements of the vocation and the formation program.

#### *Developing Healthy Criteria*

There is no doubt that the upsurge in the number of applicants to religious and priestly life could be a gift to the church. Consequently, a matching effort at discernment, proper selection, and formation of the candidates is needed.

No matter the number of seminaries built or formation houses opened as a response to the number of candidates coming forward, every effort must be made to ensure good discernment and formation programs. Because each person is unique, no one can propose a recipe that can be applied as a general rule to everyone in the selection process. Nevertheless, it is necessary to have some fundamental criteria. Perfectly mature and healthy persons do not exist! However, the candidates do need to be open to self-transcendence and growth. Equally important is an openness to and ability for deepening self-awareness.

From my experience of accompanying young people in formation, it has become clearer to me that the greatest challenge in this mentoring ministry is how to facilitate individuals in internalizing the values of Christ, to move beyond mere self-actualization and self-realization. The willingness to make a gift of oneself for the good of others is at the heart of it all!

*The first and most vital step is to accept the challenges with a spirit of gratitude because they are gifts.*



The future of the church, and the health of the priesthood and religious life in Africa as a whole, depend on a number of factors, namely: 1) the kind of persons selected for the life; 2) the quality of the discernment process; and 3) the quality and adequacy of the formation program put in place to prepare the persons for this way of life.

Sincere and faithful following of Jesus should be at the heart of this venture. And it simply needs to be done in a spirit of humility, compassion and an ardent attentiveness to God's Spirit. What is required is to daily "act justly, love tenderly, and walk humbly with our God" (Micah 5:8).

I will conclude this article with some reflective questions in the hope that they may be of help in facilitating the formation process both for the formators and those whom they are accompanying on the faith journey.

- What do I believe is the goal of formation?
- What are the particular challenges that I face in formation ministry?
- What part of the ministry do I find most difficult and why?
- What aspects of the ministry do I really enjoy and why?

- Is there at least one trained and competent person with whom I share my experiences of ministry (to be my sounding board)?

- Where do I go for support when I encounter difficulties in ministry?

- Do I have my basic need for friendship and camaraderie met outside the formation environment?

- How do I deal with my feelings of anger or resentment with some of the persons under my care?

- How do I acknowledge and accept my shortcomings in my ministry?

- When I notice my mistakes what do I do?

- Have I ever given thanks to God for the gift of this ministry to me?

- Do I create adequate time for leisure and relaxation?

- Do I create enough quality time for personal prayer and reflection?

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In *The Curse of Cain* Regina Schwartz offers some stimulating reflections on the way the people of Israel, and the Christian church that grew out of it, gradually wove together what we call the canon of Scripture. She describes a process by which the stories of significant events in the life of the people were told and, more pointedly, re-told across the centuries. The re-telling occurred under new social and political conditions, and as a result the salient features of the story would shift in their relative importance, leading to a different emphasis and meaning. Re-telling was inevitably re-interpretation.

As she points out, it's all about shared memory and its relationship to community formation. Certain events in the life of a group are lifted out of the group's global consciousness simply by being re-told (I would add: re-prayed), over and over. The very repetition contributes to fixing them as decisive or paradigmatic of the group. And in that process other

events that might have seemed equally preoccupying at the time retreat into the background. In many instances they fade so much that when they are referred to at a later date we can scarcely identify the reference. As Schwartz notes:

*If, in theory, canonization was an effort to fix the boundaries of the community, in practice both the community and its memories resisted such fixity. Furthermore, the very process of canonization was at odds with the way even so-called canonized narratives assumed shape: with their multiple and conflicting versions of memories, they mock the notion of a single authoritative one* (p. 148).

Canons. Canon-ization. Shared memories. Her train of reflection got me to thinking of the canonizing process at work in different circles within the contemporary church.

Canonizing of heroes and heroines, and canonizing of prayer forms and texts. When we engage, over extended periods, with people whom we value, it inevitably shapes our consciousness. Some themes become more central while others retreat into the background.

I wonder how much of the attitudes of Catholics who reached adulthood before Vatican II might be attributed to the fact that in the Sunday liturgies for centuries they heard passages solely from the Gospel of Matthew? Of course Mark, Luke, and John remained part of the official biblical canon through all that period. But just think of all the works and words of Jesus to which they weren't exposed. In some instances, perhaps only a small nuance was left unspoken; in others, entire events of significance for understanding, and challenging our grasp of Jesus and his mission went unheard. What? No Samaritan woman at the well?

# Good Old Obadiah, or "What's in Your Canon?"

George Wilson, S.J.

## OPERATIVE CANONS

Much has been written about a gender gap on a variety of religious issues within today's church. Young Catholics put a different valence on particular aspects of our religion than their elders. It might be fruitful to consider the possibility that much of the gap might have deeper roots than mere chronological age. The differences might be based in what we could call an *operative canon* gap. The official canon always remains scripture, the word of the Lord: for all of us, to be sure. It is always a reliable source one can turn to with the assurance of divine guidance. But within that official guide some readings are more "operative" than others: they recur more frequently, particularly in the church's liturgical rituals or its preaching or its catechetical materials. Or in the consciousness and prayer of the faithful in the pews.

Truth to tell, we each have our own personal *operative canon*. It includes the texts we find personally engaging or comforting or challenging. And leaves out whole other globs of biblical material. An operative canon gets formed whether the fact is acknowledged or not. And necessarily so.

For one reason, the scope of the biblical writings is too vast to hold all of it equally in one's consciousness. And that's quite apart from the arcane nature of some of its contents. After all, the author of 2 Peter, in a phrase that is scripturally inspired but also surely droll in intent, admitted that "brother" Paul's letters contain "some things hard to understand" (2 Peter 3:16). Each person's spiritual needs, the reason we turn to the texts, are different. And more importantly, the single mystery that the biblical texts are attempting to communicate infinitely transcends the capacity of even inspired human speech. Each phrase, or even each book in its entirety, offers but an infinitesimal peek into a light that is too blinding for our finite spirits.

## COMMUNITY CANONS

Then beyond our individual predilections we become like the *communities* we pray with. And each of those communities has its own canon. A canon of prayer formulas and a canon

of saints looked up to as models to be emulated. It's not—or at least shouldn't be—a competition, one cast of characters and scripts better than the other. It's just that we're faced with a rich array of attractions, each drawing some people and not others. All are inspired by the same Spirit that still blows wherever it wills, sometimes to the chagrin of official—or semi-official—boundary-makers.

So welcome to a tour of the midway. Over here you will find a circle gathered around Thomas Merton and his *Seeds of Contemplation*. The lode-star for some others of that era might be Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's *Hymn of the Universe*. Then invoke the name Henri Nouwen and you'll join a group that finds rich food for prayer in the brokenness of all healers. Off on one side there's a blissful group luxuriating in the contemplations of Juliana of Norwich or Hildegard of Bingen. While another group (who might never have heard of those two spiritual giants) finds the strength to confront the principalities and powers of this world in the prayer of Archbishop Oscar Romero. John Paul II gathered many with the inspirations of St. Faustina and the celebration of divine mercy, while the Ignatian cohort mines the implications of the *Suscipe*. A more cosmopolitan, if smaller, group draws life from the well of Thich Nhat Hanh, as others ponder the galaxies with Thomas Berry. And go anywhere in the world and you will hear the peace prayer of that fellow from Assisi: "and let it begin with me." Meanwhile millions (but fewer today) find the rosary quite adequate for their spirits, thank you. And then, almost lost in the midst of the stars, are the unassuming members of the addiction world, for whom the Serenity Prayer is not a spiritual luxury but rather the only thin life-line that gets them from Tuesday to Wednesday.

I apologize if I have, quite unintentionally, overlooked a key element in your canon. Oh, there's a group gathered around that oddly named Breastplate of St. Patrick, with its powerful evocation of an all-pervasive Christ: within and without, before and behind and under and over. And a cluster of our Eastern brothers and sisters inviting us to join them in the powerful Jesus prayer. And perhaps you will allow me to offer my own personal candidate, from the

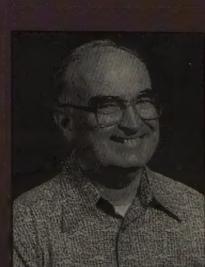
*Didache*: Remember, Lord, Thy Church, to deliver it from all evil and to make it perfect in Thy love, and gather it from the four winds, sanctified for Thy kingdom which Thou have prepared for it; for Thine is the power and the glory for ever.

## GOOD OLD OBADIAH

Elements in our operative canons wax and wane, whether as individual believers or even as a church. Just consider good old Obadiah. You'll find him in the official canon of scripture, wedged in between Amos and Jonah. At a mere 21 verses long and made up of some pretty rough fulminations against the Edomites, I doubt that you have ever looked to him for spiritual nourishment or guidance. But at some point along the way, when other nominees for inclusion in the canon were being screened out, Obadiah's words must have struck a chord with the screeners. The Lord was saying something the people needed to hear. Not exactly a soft rain gently soaking the earth but water for that particular time's thirst.

Now he enjoys a dubious, sad distinction. Out of the whole biblical canon he's the only author whose words are never cited in the official prayer of the church. I can only imagine him as the walk-on who made the team and scrimmaged every day to help hone the skills of the scholarship guys. And then never got into a real game. His jersey doesn't hang from the rafters. But hey, he got his letter.

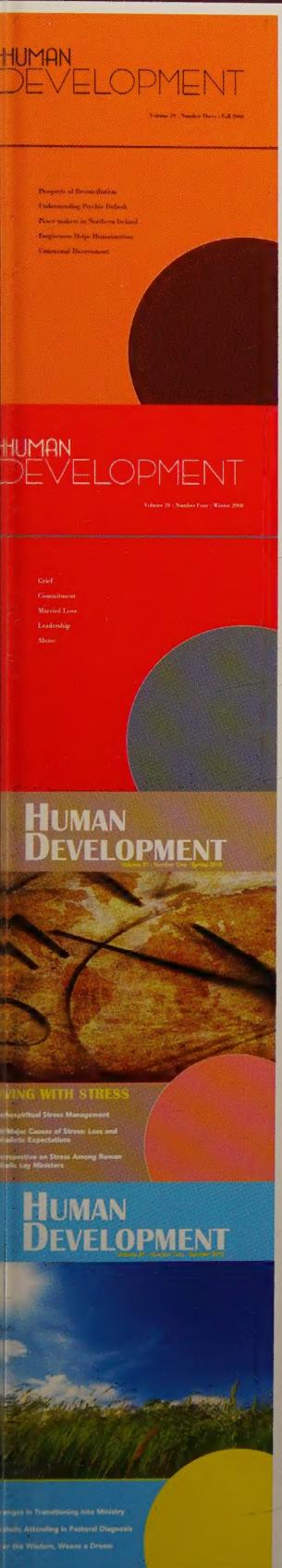
The journey from Abraham to the Kingdom is a long and winding road. Let's shower appropriate acclaim on the five-star prophets who light our ways for long stretches. But let's not forget the occasional Obadiah who helped us to get us from Wednesday to Thursday. And then faded into the mist.



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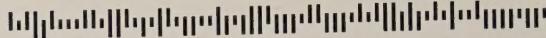
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